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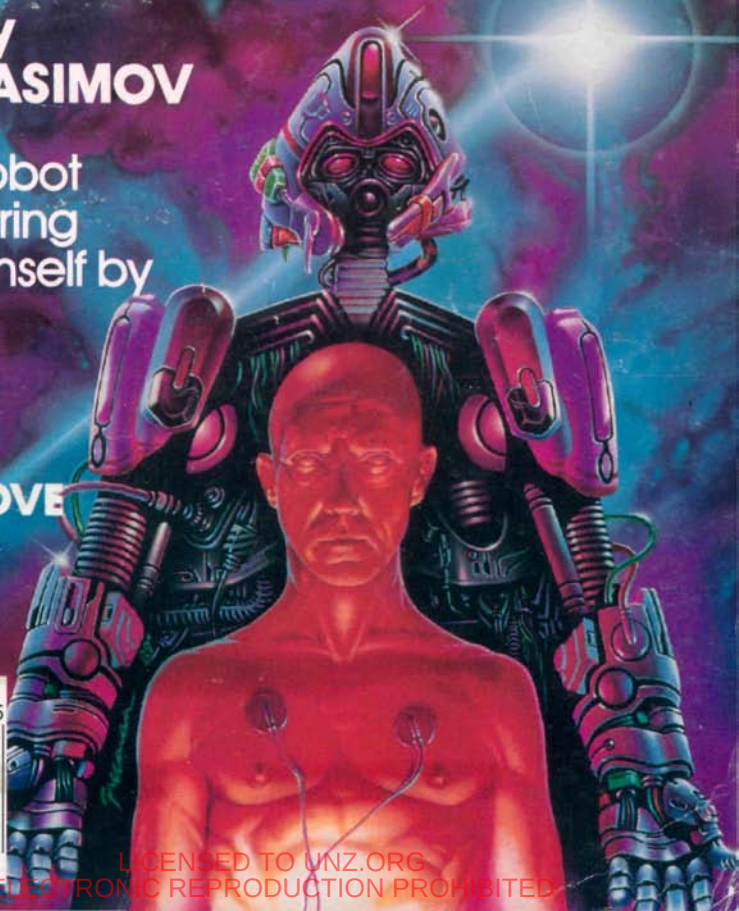

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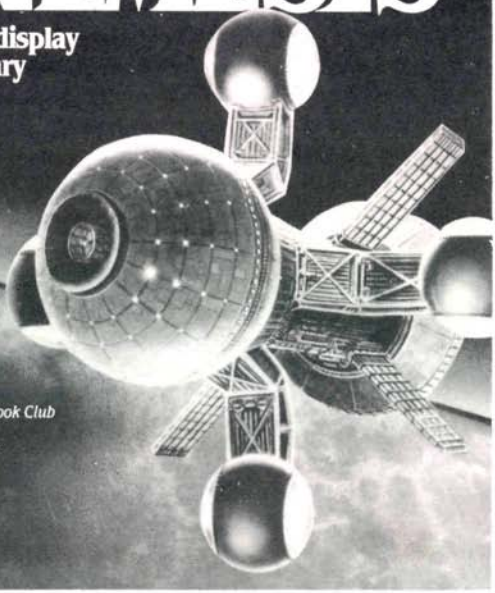

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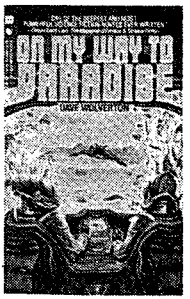
REPORT

"I began writing ON MY WAY TO PARADISE in response to a dream," author Dave Wolverton tells us. "I dreamed I was on a dusty market street and the sun was glaring; peasants in white were milling about, and a horribly emaciated woman was walking toward me, boring her dark eyes into me, and she held a bloody stump at the end of her right arm. I wanted desperately to help her, to give her something. When I woke, the dream haunted me, and I decided to write a story in which I'd give her a new hand."

What began as a dream became first an award-winning short story — taking Grand Prize in the 1986 Writers of the Future contest—and then a stunning first novel, a skillful merger of cyberpunk and Latin American realism. For there was much more to the tale of Angelo Osic and the woman he aids. "I began having dreams about Angelo," Wolverton says. "Mercenaries in battle armor huddled beneath an alien skull, telling jokes about their rivals. Giant dark crabs in a mist-shrouded forest, whispering with soft feminine voices. A Desert Lord, like a giant mantis, bursting from a hidden lair in the sand to throw its stones."

The result was ON MY WAY TO PARADISE, which multiple award-winner Orson Scott Card calls "One of the deepest and most powerful science fiction novels ever written," adding, "Many fine works that have won Hugos and Nebulas pale beside this book."

We don't need to add much to this assessment, except that we hope Dave Wolverton finishes his second novel soon. We believe, along with Scott Card, that ON MY WAY TO PARADISE may be indeed "the first book by the finest science fiction writer of the 1990s."



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Mid-December 1989
Next issue on sale
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Published 13 times a year by Davis Publications, Inc. at $2.00 per copy ($2.50 per copy in Canada). Annual subscription of thirteen issues $25.97 in the United States and U.S. possessions. In all other countries $30.67, payable in advance in U.S. funds. Address for subscriptions and all other correspondence about them, P.O. Box 7058, Red Oak, Iowa 51566. For back issues send $3.50 to Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, P.O. Box 40, Vernon, NJ 07462. Address for all editorial matters; Davis Publications, Inc., 380 Lexington Avenue, NY, NY 10017. Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine® is the registered trademark of Davis Publications, Inc. © 1989 by Davis Publications, Inc., 380 Lexington Ave., New York, NY 10017. All rights reserved, printed in the U.S.A. Protection secured under the Universal and Pan American Copyright Conventions. Reproduction or use of editorial or pictorial content in any manner without express permission is prohibited. All submissions must include a self-addressed, stamped envelope; the publisher assumes no responsibility for *unsolicited manuscripts*. Second class postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Canadian third class postage paid at Windsor, Ontario. POSTMASTER, send change of address to IAsfm, Box 7058, Red Oak, Iowa 51566. In Canada return to 1801 South Cameron, Windsor, Ontario N9B 3E1. ISSN 0162-2188.

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EDITORIAL

by Isaac Asimov

METAPHOR

I received a letter from a fan the other day, one who had bought a copy of *Agent of Byzantium* by Harry Turtledove, which appeared in a series entitled "Isaac Asimov Presents." (That's why he wrote to me.)

The cover shows a man dressed, says my correspondent, "in a Romanesque military uniform, holding a Roman helmet in his left hand." He also carried "a very large, very modern, very lethal looking blaster rifle" and "an electronic scanning device."

My correspondent was intrigued by the anachronism, bought the book, read it, and "enjoyed the book." However, he found no place in the story where a man was holding such a rifle and scanning device, and he felt cheated. He had been lured into buying and reading the book by an inaccurate piece of cover art, and he wrote to complain.

So I thought about it. Now my knowledge of art is so small as to be beneath contempt, so naturally, I can't be learned about it. There is, however, nothing I don't understand about the word-trade (fifty years of intimate, continuous and successful practice at it gives me the right to say that), and so I will approach matters from that angle.

I see the reader's complaint as the protest of the "literalist" against "metaphor." The literalist wants a piece of art (whether word or picture) to be precise and exact with all its information in plain view on the surface. Metaphor, however, (from a Greek word meaning "transfer") converts one piece of information into another analogous one, because the second one is more easily visualizable, more dramatic, more (in short) poetic. However, you have to realize there is a transfer involved and if you're a "born-again literalist," if I may use the phrase, you miss the whole point.

Let's try the Bible, for instance. The children of Israel are wandering in the desert and come to the borders of Canaan. Spies are sent in to see what the situation is and their hearts fail them. They find a people with strong, walled cities; with many elaborate chariots and skilled armies; and with a high technology. They come back and report "all the people we saw in it are men of a great stature. And there we saw the giants. . . . and

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we were in our own sight as grasshoppers and so we were in their sight."

Right! They were of "great stature" in the sense that they had a high technology. They were "giants" of technology and the Israelites were "grasshoppers" in comparison. There was as much chance, the spies felt, of the Israelites defeating the Canaanites as of a grasshopper defeating a man.

It makes perfect metaphoric sense. The use of "giants" and "grasshoppers" is *dramatic* and gets across the idea. However, both Jewish and Christian fundamentalists get the vague notion that the Canaanites were two hundred feet tall, so that ordinary human beings were as grasshoppers in comparison. The infliction of literalism on us by fundamentalists who read the Bible without seeing anything but words is one of the great tragedies of history.

Or let's turn to Shakespeare and the tragedy of *Macbeth*.

Macbeth has just killed Duncan and his hands are bloody and he is himself horror-struck at the deed. Lady Macbeth is concerned over her husband's having been unmanned and gives him some practical advice. "Go," she says, "get some water and wash this filthy witness from your hand."

And Macbeth, his whole mind in disarray, says, "Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood clean from my hand? No. This my hand will rather the multitudinous seas

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incarnadine, making the green one red."

It's a powerful figure, as you see a bloody hand dipped into the ocean and all the vast sea turning red in response, but, literally, it makes no sense. How can a few drops of blood turn the ocean red? All the blood in all the human beings on Earth if poured into the ocean would not change its overall color perceptibly. Macbeth might seem to be indulging in "hyperbole" (an extravagant exaggeration which sometimes makes its point, but usually reduces it to ridicule).

This, however, is not hyperbole, but metaphor. Consider! Macbeth has killed a man who had loved him and loaded him with honors, so he commits the terrible sin of ingratitude. Furthermore, the man he murdered was a guest in his house, so that Macbeth has violated the hallowed and civilized rules of hospitality. Finally, the man he murdered was his king and in Shakespeare's time, a king was looked upon as the visible representative of God on Earth. This triple crime has loaded Macbeth's soul with infinite guilt.

The blood cannot redden the ocean, but the blood is not blood, it is used here as a metaphor for guilt. The picture of the ocean turning red gives you a violently dramatic notion of the infinite blackness that now burdens Macbeth's soul, something you couldn't get if he had merely said, "Oh, my guilt is infinite."

A literalist who sets about calculating the effect on the ocean of a bloody hand is getting no value out of what he reads.

One more example. Consider Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. In the fourteenth verse of the third part, there come the lines: "Till clomb above the eastern bar the horned Moon, with one bright star within the nether tip."

The "horned Moon" is the crescent moon, of course, and there *can't* be a bright star within the nether tip. The crescent is the lighted portion of the moon, but the rest of it, though out of the sunlight and dark, is still there. For a bright star to be within the nether tip is to have it shining through hundreds of miles of lunar substance. It is an impossibility, and I don't know how many readers have snickered at Coleridge's naïveté in this.

But is it naïveté? The poem begins very simply and naturally till the Ancient Mariner kills the albatross, a lovable and unoffending bird. This itself is a metaphor. After all, human beings have killed lovable and unoffending birds since time immemorial. In this case, though, the killing represents all the callous and indifferent cruelty of the human species, and, as a result, the ship with its crew (who approved the Mariner's deed) enters a strange world in which natural law is suspended and chaos is come again as God removes himself. The atmosphere of the poem become weird and unearthly and normality begins to return only after the Mariner involuntarily

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blesses all the living things in the ocean in a gush of love.

I have a feeling that Coleridge knew that a star could not shine within the nether tip of the crescent but merely used it as one more example of the chaos of a world in which human cruelty denies love, order, and God's presence. It is only fitting that a star shine where no star could possibly shine.

To miss that point is to miss the point of the poem and to understand only its jigging meter and its clever rhyming—which is plenty, but far from enough. A literalist deprives himself of the best part of art.

Suppose we apply this way of looking at things to visual art. If you ask an artist to illustrate a piece of writing *precisely*, you make of him a slave to the literal word. You suppress his creativity and impugn the independence of his mind and ability. The better the artist, the less likely he is (barring an absolute need for money) to accept such a job.

An artist worth his salt does not illustrate the literal words, but the mood of a story. He tries, by virtue of his art and ability, to deepen and reinforce the meaning of a story and the intent of the writer.

Thus, in the mid-December 1988 issue, the cover of *Asimov's* illustrates my story "Christmas Without Rodney." It does not illustrate any incident in the story. Instead it shows in the foreground a boy, with a sullen and self-absorbed expression. What's more, the predominant color is red, which to my way of thinking symbolizes anger (a metaphor for the flushed face of a person in rage). This demonstrates the anger of a spoiled brat who does not instantly have his own way, and the anger he inspires in the narrator of the story. Behind the boy is an elaborate robot, with one metal hand to his cheek as though uncertain as to his course of action, something that fulfils one of the underlying themes of the story. The artist, Gary Freeman, does not illustrate the story, but adds to it and gives it a visual dimension. That is what he is supposed to do and what he is paid to do.

This brings us to the cover illustration of *Agent of Byzantium*. It is clearly the intent of the artist to illustrate the *nature* of the story, not the story itself. Constantinople is in the background, identified by the gilded dome of Hagia Sophia. In the foreground is a soldier who has Byzantine characteristics. So far we have an historical novel. But he also possesses objects of high technology associated with modern western culture. Clearly it is an historical novel set in an alternate reality. And that is what the book deals with. The cover is precise, it tells us what we need to know, it satisfies the artist's own cravings, and if the *details* of the technology are not precisely met in any incident in the book, that matters not a whit.●

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LETTERS

Dear Dr. Asimov, et al.:

Your editorial in the *IAsfm*, April 1989 issue struck a note with me. You referred to science fiction writers as being in a ghetto—at least in the past. I suspect that ghetto has become a walled fortress.

Among my several interests I do some writing and have sold a decent number of articles dealing with various factual subjects. At the same time, I have been reading science fiction for a good number of years (for example, I am a charter subscriber to *IAsfm* and have a complete set) and I would like to be able to sell some science fiction myself.

Now when other magazines I submit articles to reject an article, they give me some idea why they don't want it. Some send a personal letter, some use a check list, some have a toll-free number where I can call and talk it over.

But when my stories to science fiction magazines are rejected I don't have any idea why. Even your magazine sends only a friendly, but uninformative letter since it doesn't tell me why *my* story wasn't accepted.

So I tried writing to established writers. I kept the letters brief. I included self-addressed, stamped envelopes. I even used postcards with check lists—a simple check and back in the mail with it was all that was needed. I didn't send manuscripts, but asked if the person was willing to correspond for a few letters. At most I outlined a few ideas. Replies? Once! Harry Turtledove was kind enough to send a form letter (or so it seemed), not terribly useful, but at least he answered.

Granted, there are places like the Clarion Workshop, but that takes more time and money than I can spare with a family to care for. So do I have to just keep at it hit-or-miss until I stumble on "the secret" of producing something editors will buy? Probably so.

In short, if science fiction writers are in a ghetto, it's because they *want* to be—they sure don't seem to want anyone else in with them.

In an unrelated area, may I compliment Dr. Asimov on his modeling of the *IAsfm* T-shirt. A real touch of class. Though the photo doesn't do him justice—the lighting makes too much glare on his face and glasses and throws shadows that create the false impression that he isn't as youthful as we know he actually is.

Sincerely,

Lon J. Rombough
Salem, OR

I can't speak for other writers, but

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if you write to me *(and I don't think you have as yet) you will get no satisfaction at all. I can't teach you how to write. There are, in my opinion, two kinds of people; those with some talent at writing, who continue to write until they are good enough to sell; and those without talent at writing whom no amount of teaching will help. If you think that a few key words will convert you from unsaleable to saleable, and that we are withholding those key words just out of nasty selfishness, you are being incredibly naïve.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mr. Dozois:

Please let Norman know that his article on J. G. Ballard was extraordinary, exquisite; and fired me up with the ambition to investigate Ballard's corpus. I hope I can find most of the books! You of all people, Gardner, must appreciate the contribution that Ballard has made to English and American letters—since as I recall, you too were considered a mainstay of the New Wave movement.

I should very much like to see further such critical evaluations of this most exciting period of SF evolution; perhaps Norman could select some other deserving author from one or the other side of the drink, and summarize his or her contribution as he did with J. G. Ballard.

Sincerely,

Dafydd ab Hugh
4471 Maplewood Ave.
Los Angeles, CA 90004

We will let Norman know.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

Thank you for a terrific magazine. I appreciate your high literary standards and your attitude toward new writers. The editorials, book reviews, and the old Viewpoint articles have been an education for me, not to mention the wonderful variety of fiction offered.

I am a homemaker, mother of six gifted and therefore very challenging children, who keep me running. It is very nice to "escape" once in a while and devour an *IAsfm*. Delicious and nourishing alone, it is even better with a box of bon-bons. And a bubblebath.

Brains, wit, and charm are important to a lot of us ladies. It is hard to find them all in one package. You are admired by thousands of women, I'm sure. I happen to be lucky enough to have a man with all three *and* Vulcan eyebrows.

Please keep up the good work. I may not like all the stories you publish, but I can appreciate them.

Gratefully,

Kathi Sudholt
Jefferson City, MO

I am *admired by thousands of women, but the second worst thing about it is that they admire me for my mind. The very worst thing about it is that I've grown old enough to be* relieved *that that's what they admire me for. (Pardon me, while I break down and weep uncontrollably.)*

Isaac Asimov

Dr. Asimov:

I waited unconscionably long to acquaint myself with your magazine—until last summer to be pre-

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cise, when, one evening in the home of Marlene Bonita Schultz, I became engrossed in a current issue. Since Scholar Schultz teaches a course in science fiction at a Detroit area high school, she well understood why I chose your company over hers. I had such praise for what I found therein (finally having to borrow it for still another lending to a third party) that she gave me a year's subscription. I fell in love with my first, the January issue. Such power in writing, such variety! Now my cup runneth over with science fiction magazines by her hand, and my general education does not suffer in addition.

A side note on your "Good Old Days" April editorial which I read today. I am in complete agreement with you when you take a stick to the Stalinist history conjured up to give respectability to current writers. Yes, there was embryonic science fiction during the nineteenth century, but there was not all *that* much of it, nor did it find its way very far into the salons of the *literati*. I take mild exception to your denigration of 1907 and preceding decades, however. No, people were not starving *en masse* in hovels (in the western world) in the *belle epoque*. Furthermore, the people of that era would be horrified at the later perfectly acceptable notions of firebombing Hamburg and Tokyo, or of the "liquidation" at Babi Yar. The twentieth century ain't all been Progress.

G. M. Ross
Lowell, MI

I don't know. If the people of the nineteenth century had had our technology, they would have used it, I'm sure. As it was, the people of la belle epoque *divided up Africa without any regard for the natives and treated them more or less as animals. Every age and every place has its miseries.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov, Mr. Dozois, and any other interested parties,

After having read your great magazine for years, I've finally come up against something that inspires me to write you: curiosity. Many stories in your magazine have aroused my curiosity before, but personal research has always answered my questions. My question is: why the warning before Judith Moffet's excellent "Tiny Tango"? It had AIDS, penises, nuclear accidents, unhappiness, and alienation. Anyone on the planet today has to deal with all of these things—a warning seems pointless. Unless we become more isolated than the character in the story, we must run the risk of dealing with life's unpleasantries. It has always seemed to me that *IAsfm* readers would not be faint-of-heart. Your magazine has intense and thought-provoking and controversial stories in nearly every issue. Warning readers against thought-provoking stories seems counter-productive.

In any case, thank you for printing another unsettling story—the less complacent we become, the better.

Erica Yungen
Monmouth, OR

Well, believe it or not, some readers don't like to be unsettled. For

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instance, I get upset at undue vulgarity or violence. However, when I get upset, I just stop reading, but others get very *upset and write letters. If we can fend them off with a warning and prevent their unhappiness, it pleases us. And if they read it, despite the warning, then they have no grounds for complaint, you see.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mr. Asimov:

Reading your February '89 editorial this week, where you lament having become a sage, I couldn't help but smile to myself. Not so long ago I listened to a tape from my local library of an interview you and Fredrik Pohl (another sage) did for the Norton publishing house at least twenty to twenty-five years ago. It was an entertaining half hour or so in which you and Mr. Pohl dealt with the past and future of science fiction, and a lot of other things, too. Even though the Norton representative was, even then, treating you as a source of wisdom, it was quite evident from the tape that you were having a good time. My suspicion is that you still are. I for one am glad we still have you around, as voluble as ever.

But I'm also thinking that it's about time we heard the voice of Gardner Dozois in your magazine. Having been a fan of his writing, and editing, for quite a few years, I know this side of Mr. Dozois is being wasted.

Aren't two sages better than one?

Sincerely,

Ken Enston
Willowdale, Ontario
Canada

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Believe me, Gardner isn't being wasted. He spends full time reading stories and deciding on which to publish. His success in this respect is undoubted and I would not willingly ask him to shoulder any other burden at the magazine. He can do anything I do—editorial-writing and letter-answering, for instance—but I can't possibly do what he does. Therefore, it is only fitting that I do the trivia and he does the important stuff.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mr. Dozois,

I found the conclusion of Norman Spinrad's "Cyberpunk Revisited" disappointing. Why is he, in common with a number of writer-critics on this side of the Atlantic, so keen to consign cyberpunk to oblivion? After all, doesn't such a standpoint imply that cyberpunk's subject matter and any associated literary tone should also be put to bed with a shovel?

Apparently Norman identifies cyberpunk solely with the Movement, and the Movement solely with Sterling, Gibson, Rucker, Shiner, and Shirley. Therefore cyberpunk *is* the Magnificent Five—when they spread out to do different things cyberpunk died. Q.E.D.

Come *on!* This is the Warhol Syndrome to the max—"you've had your fifteen minutes, buddy, so pack it and vanish."

Some of us in the UK prefer an alternative evolutionary approach; the accumulation of developments and breakthroughs, acting on and reacting with one another. The New Wave didn't die: its consequences, exemplified by a subversive Ballardian boldness, live on. As with cyberpunk; it's not the property of any clique, nor the province of any ultracommercial publisher. Its subject matter and global sensibility won't simply disappear—we're crossing the threshold of the postmodern era and cyberpunk is our articulation of it, and our handle on the age.

Sincerely,

Mike Cobley
Glasgow
Scotland
United Kingdom

I suppose it's a sign of the growing popularity of science fiction that it can divide itself into sects and sub-sects, and people can argue about the vitality of this group and that. I just hope the arguments don't get violent enough to involve the thumbscrew and the rack.

—Isaac Asimov

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It was the late 20th century, and the world seemed poised above some mysterious abyss. Millions around the globe searched the skies for the Blue Star they believed would bring the Millennium. And mystic phenomena had become so common that special U.N. teams investigated them. But, when the president of the U.S. told his staff that he'd been kidnapped by aliens from space, it was the beginning of the end...

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NEAT STUFF

by Matthew J. Costello

The magazines that cover the science fiction and fantasy field have had lot of fun lately reporting the mammoth book deals made by Stephen King and Dean Koontz. And beneath those two masters, there are countless other scribes who are doing quite well toiling in the murky field of dark fantasy. Or, if you will, horror.

And despite the obvious talents of Messrs. Koontz and King, I date the rise of the contemporary horror genre to one specific person, one book, and, most clearly, one film.

The Exorcist (Hoya Productions/Warner Bros, 1973, 122 min.), by William Peter Blatty, was worlds removed from the gothic expressionism of the Universal films of the Thirties, and way beyond anything Hammer released in its new cycle of horror classics that began in the Fifties with Terence Fisher's *The Curse of Frankenstein*.

The Exorcist as a book, and later as a film, was filled with a hard-edged reality that brought an immensely powerful, demonic evil into our stressful everyday world. It wasn't the moors of Scotland, or the backwoods of Maine, that were haunted. It was your living room, your bedroom, your little girl. *The Exorcist* brought horror home in more ways than one. Nearly every horror writer has tapped into its imagery, its visceral shocks. From the countless book covers featuring children and skeletons, to the new-wave splatter that has already become a cliché, modern horror started with *The Exorcist*.

When I read that there was to be a new film, *The Exorcist:1990*, my interest was piqued, for a number of reasons. Author Bill Blatty had nothing to do with Hollywood's very-confused sequel, *The Heretic*. He was directing *this* film, though, from his own screenplay based on his novel, *Legion*. George C. Scott was in the cast, as well as Ed Flanders from "St. Elsewhere," and—with a twelve million dollar budget—the film looked as if it had potential.

But I had another reason for being interested. Blatty went to the same high school I did, the Jesuit-run Brooklyn Preparatory. He went on to spend more time with the Jesuits at Georgetown University. It was there that Blatty said he heard the story that is the basis for his novel about demonic possession.

I attended the press conference held on the day production on the new film started. The hotel confer-

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ence room was filled with the director, the actors, reporters, and cameras. George C. Scott said that his own interest was piqued by the script which he said was "beautifully written. It's the first time I've been scared by a screenplay in thirty years." Scott plays Lt. Kinderman, the role essayed by Lee J. Cobb in the original film. Scott especially admired the flashback and dream sequences.

Blatty said that the new film, "starts where the old one ends. *The Exorcist* posed the problem of evil but only provided hints about the possible answer. The new film will look at the nature of that 'evil.' "

Unlike the original film, *The Exorcist:1990* will not be a special effects tour-de-force. There are, Blatty said, "almost no acts of violence. We rely on creaks and shapes in the mind. Your mind can produce infinitely more terror." Though there is to be "one breathtaking moment at the end of the film," this time audiences will not be grossed out by displays of regurgitation and head-spinning. Such effects have, Blatty is surely aware, become clichés in the field.

But he is setting out to create genuine fear. And more, as he spoke wistfully of his desire to move the audience. He hopes, he commented, "that the audience will be transported out of their bodies for two hours."

Since Blatty's film will obviously deal with cosmic evil, a reporter asked him what his concept of evil was. Blatty hesitated, asking if the audience really wanted to hear about it. With some urging, he explained his idea, derived from reading the Jesuit theologian/ scholar Teilhard de Chardin.

"The material universe is a person," he said. "And it had a name." Man has fallen, Blatty suggested, and the spiritual has become physical. That is the evil. We fight against the pull of the material world, against that evil, to return to the state of pure spirit.

It is this battle he will be playing with in *The Exorcist:1990*. . . . The power of the material world against the world of the spirit.

With most horror movies devoted to crazed slashers and endless red goo, and splatterpunk novelists who substitute grue for terror, and magazines (and these really scare me) devoted to full-color gore shots, Blatty—the father of it all—hopes to make a statement about the true traditions of literary and cinematic horror. Special effects aren't what it's all about . . . and they never were.

The conference broke up, and Blatty and the actors left to start the film, ready to wrestle with some intriguing ideas, ready to try to scare us in this last decade of the twentieth century.●

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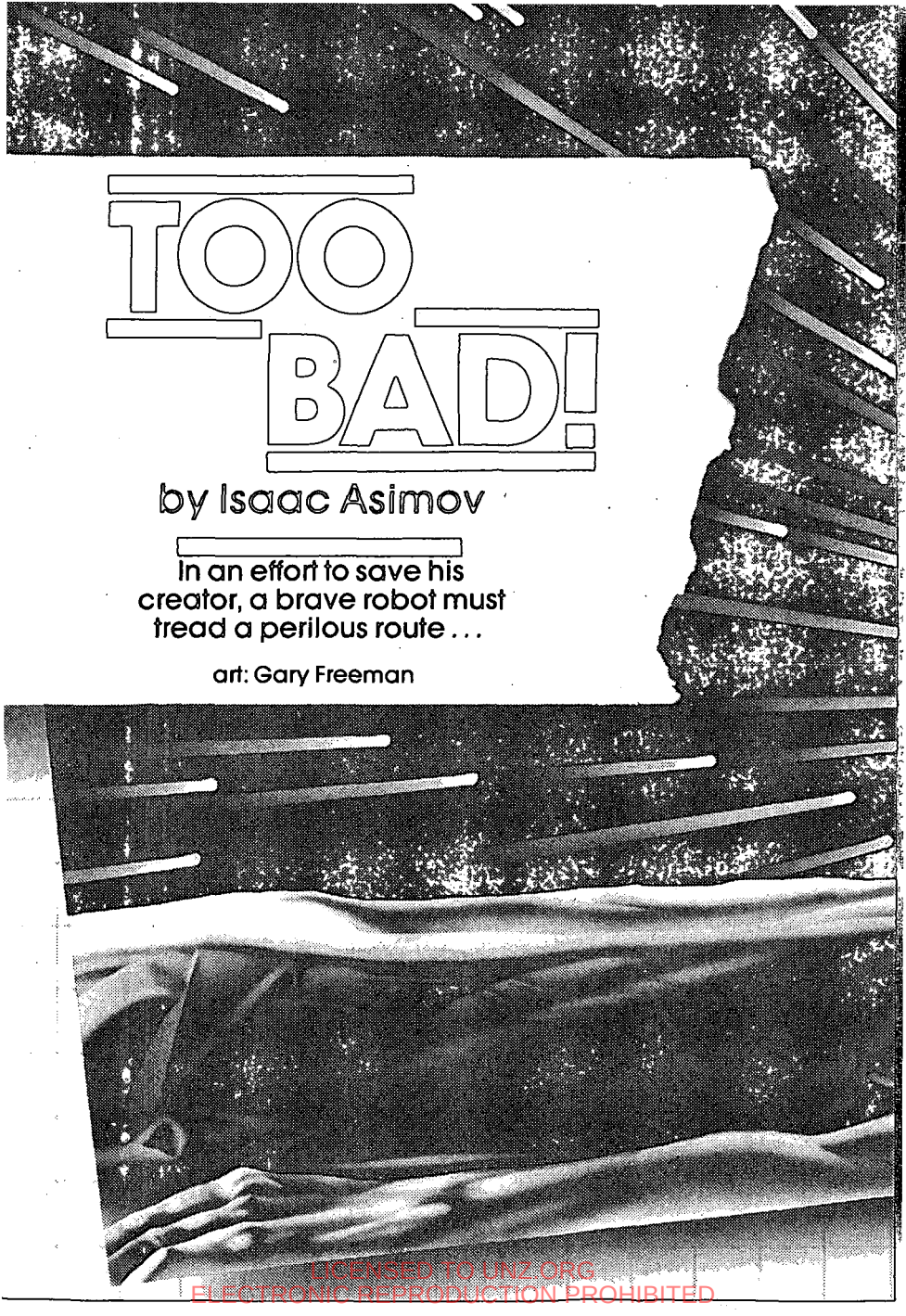

TOO BAD!

by Isaac Asimov

In an effort to save his creator, a brave robot must tread a perilous route . . .

art: Gary Freeman

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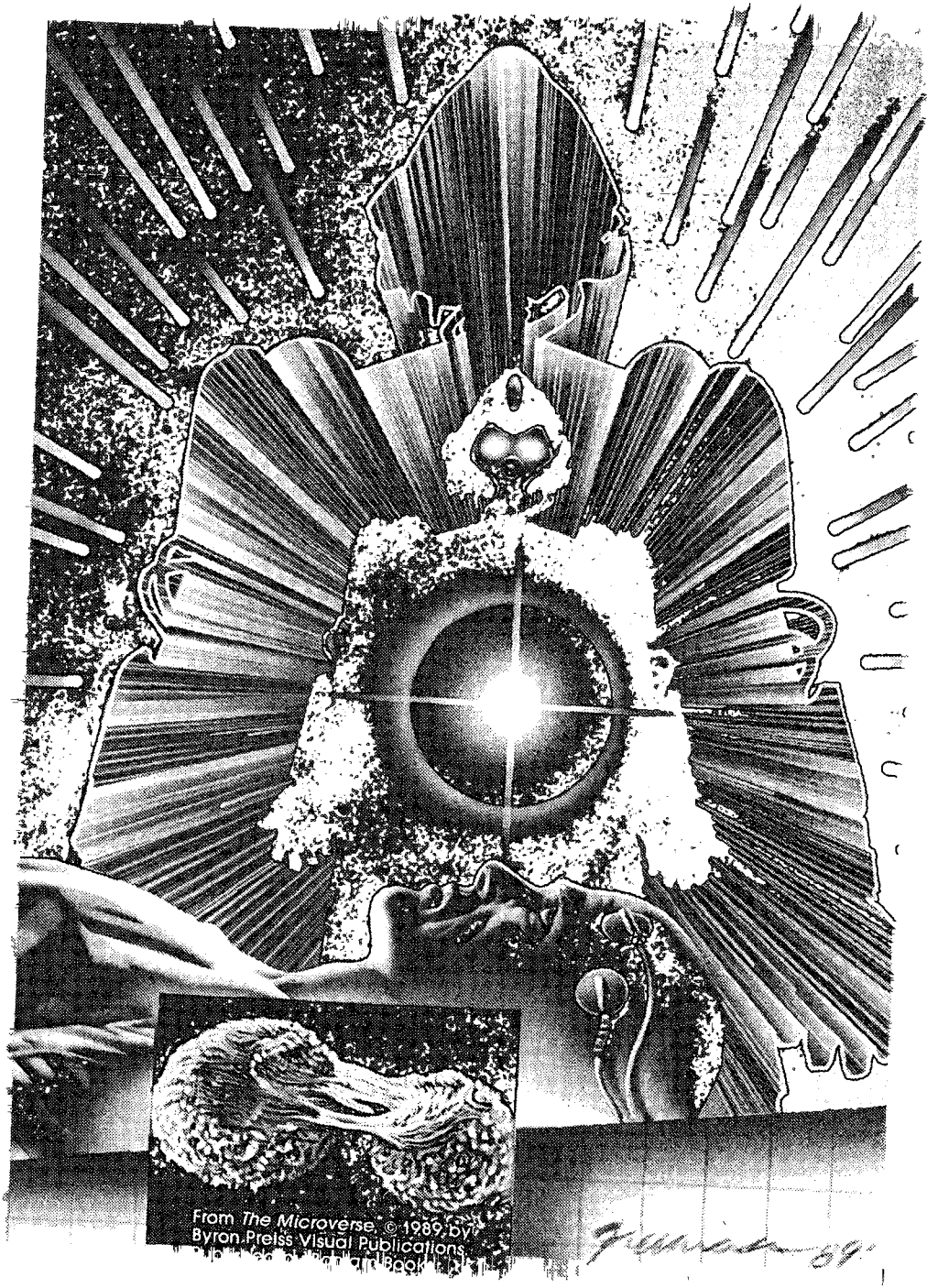

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The Three Laws of Robotics

1—A robot may not injure a human being, or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.

2—A robot must obey the orders given it by human beings except where that would conflict with the First Law.

3—A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law.

Gregory Arnfeld was not actually dying, but certainly there was a sharp limit to how long he might live. He had inoperable cancer and he had refused, strenuously, all suggestions of chemical treatment or of radiation therapy.

He smiled at his wife as he lay propped up against the pillows and said, "I'm the perfect case, Tertia, and Mike will handle it."

Tertia did not smile. She looked dreadfully concerned. "There are so many things that can be done, Gregory. Surely Mike is a last resort. You may not need it."

"No, no, by the time they're done drenching me with chemicals and dousing me with radiation, I would be so far gone that it wouldn't be a reasonable test. —And please don't call Mike 'it.' "

"This is the twenty-second century, Greg. There are so many ways of handling cancer."

"Yes, but Mike is one of them, and I think the best. This *is* the twenty-second century and we know what robots can do. Certainly, I know. I had more to do with Mike than anyone else. You know that."

"But you can't want to use him just out of pride of design. Besides, how certain are you of miniaturization? That's an even newer technique than robotics."

Arnfeld nodded. "Granted, Tertia. But the miniaturization boys seem confident. They can reduce or restore Planck's constant in what they say is a reasonably foolproof manner and the controls that make that possible are built into Mike. He can make himself smaller or larger at will without affecting his surroundings."

"*Reasonably* foolproof," said Tertia with soft bitterness.

"That's all anyone can ask for, surely. Think of it, Tertia. I am privileged to be part of the experiment. I'll go down in history as the principal designer of Mike, but that will be secondary. My greatest feat will be that of having been successfully treated by a mini-robot—by my own choice, by my own initiative."

"You know it's dangerous."

"There's danger to everything. Chemicals and radiation have their side effects. They can slow without stopping. They can allow me to live a wearying sort of half-life. And doing nothing will certainly kill me. If

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Mike does his job properly, I shall be completely healthy, and if it recurs," (Arnfeld smiled joyously), "Mike can recur as well."

He put out his hand to grasp hers. "Tertia, we've known this was coming, you and I. Let's make something out of this—a glorious experiment. Even if it fails—and it won't fail—it will be a glorious experiment."

Louis Secundo, of the miniaturization group, said, "No, Mrs. Arnfeld. We can't guarantee success. Miniaturization is intimately involved with quantum mechanics and there is a strong element of the unpredictable there. As MIK-27 reduces his size, there is always the chance that a sudden unplanned re-expansion will take place, naturally killing the—the patient. The greater the reduction in size, the tinier the robot becomes, the greater the chance of re-expansion. And once he starts expanding again, the chance of a sudden accelerated burst is even higher. The re-expansion is the really dangerous part."

Tertia shook her head. "Do you think it will happen?"

"The chances are it won't, Mrs. Arnfeld. But the chance is never zero. You must understand that."

"Does Dr. Arnfeld understand that?"

"Certainly. We have discussed this in detail. He feels that the circumstances warrant the risk." He hesitated. "So do we. I know that you'll say we're not running the risk, but a few of us will be and we nevertheless feel the experiment to be worthwhile. More important, Dr. Arnfeld does."

"What if Mike makes a mistake or reduces himself too far because of a glitch in the mechanism. Then re-expansion would be certain, wouldn't it?"

"It never becomes quite *certain*. It remains statistical. The chances improve if he gets too small. But then the smaller he gets, the less massive he is, and at some critical point, mass will become so insignificant that the least effort on his part will send him flying off at nearly the speed of light."

"Well, won't *that* kill the doctor?"

"No. By that time, Mike would be so small, he would slip between the atoms of the doctor's body without affecting them."

"But how likely would it be that he would re-expand when he's that small?"

"When MIK-27 approaches neutrino-size, so to speak, his half-life would be in the neighborhood of seconds. That is, the chances are fifty-fifty that he would re-expand within seconds, but by the time he re-expanded, he would be a hundred thousand miles away in outer space and the explosion that resulted would merely produce a small burst of gamma rays for the astronomers to puzzle over. —Still, none of that will

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happen. MIK-27 will have his instructions and he will reduce himself to no smaller than he will need to be to carry out his mission."

Mrs. Arnfeld knew she would have to face the press one way or another. She had adamantly refused to appear on holo-vision and the right-to-privacy provision of the World Charter protected her. On the other hand, she could not refuse to answer questions on a voice-over basis. The right-to-know provision would not allow a blanket blackout.

She sat stiffly, while the young woman facing her said, "Aside from all that, Mrs. Arnfeld, isn't it a rather weird coincidence that your husband, chief designer of Mike the Microrobot, should also be its first patient?"

"Not at all, Miss Roth," said Mrs. Arnfeld wearily. "The doctor's condition is a predisposition. There have been others in his family who have had it. He told me of it when we married, so I was in no way deceived in the matter, and it was for that reason that we have had no children. It is also for that reason that my husband chose his lifework and labored so assiduously to produce a robot capable of miniaturization. He always felt he would be its patient eventually, you see."

Mrs. Arnfeld insisted on interviewing Mike and, under the circumstances, that could not be denied. Ben Johannes, who had worked with her husband for five years, and whom she knew well enough to be on first-name terms with, brought her into the robot's quarters.

Mrs. Arnfeld had seen Mike soon after his construction, when he was being put through his primary tests, and he remembered her. He said, in his curiously neutral voice, too smoothly average to be quite human, "I am pleased to see you, Mrs. Arnfeld."

He was not a well-shaped robot. He looked pin-headed and very bottom-heavy. He was almost conical, point upward. Mrs. Arnfeld knew that was because his miniaturization mechanism was bulky and abdominal and because his brain had to be abdominal as well in order to increase the speed of response. It was an unnecessary anthropomorphism to insist on a brain behind a tall cranium, her husband had explained. Yet it made Mike seem ridiculous, almost moronic. There were psychological advantages to anthropomorphism, Mrs. Arnfeld thought, uneasily.

"Are you sure you understand your task, Mike?" said Mrs. Arnfeld.

"Completely, Mrs. Arnfeld," said Mike. "I will see to it that every vestige of cancer is removed."

Johannes said, "I'm not sure if Gregory explained it, but Mike can easily recognize a cancer cell when he is at the proper size. The difference is unmistakable and he can quickly destroy the nucleus of any cell that is not normal."

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"I am laser-equipped, Mrs. Arnfeld," said Mike, with an odd air of unexpressed pride.

"Yes, but there are millions of cancer cells all over. It would take how long to get them, one by one?"

"Not quite necessarily one by one, Tertia," said Johannes. "Even though the cancer is widespread, it exists in clumps. Mike is equipped to burn off and close capillaries leading to the clump, and a million cells could die at a stroke in that fashion. He will only occasionally have to deal with cells on an individual basis."

"Still, how long would it take?"

Johannes' youngish face went into a grimace as though it were difficult to decide what to say. "It could take hours, Tertia, if we're to do a thorough job. I admit that."

"And every moment of those hours will increase the chance of re-expansion."

Mike said, "Mrs. Arnfeld, I will labor to prevent re-expansion."

Mrs. Arnfeld turned to the robot and said, earnestly, "Can you, Mike? I mean, is it possible for you to prevent it?"

"Not entirely, Mrs. Arnfeld. By monitoring my size and making an effort to keep it constant, I can minimize the random changes that might lead to a re-expansion. Naturally, it is almost impossible to do this when I am actually re-expanding under controlled conditions."

"Yes, I know. My husband has told me that re-expansion is the most dangerous time. But you will try, Mike? Please?"

"The laws of robotics insure that I will, Mrs. Arnfeld," said Mike solemnly.

As they left, Johannes said in what Mrs. Arnfeld understood to be an attempt at reassurance, "Really, Tertia, we have a holo-sonogram and a detailed CAT scan of the area. Mike knows the precise location of every significant cancerous lesion. Most of the time spent will be when he is searching for small lesions undetectable by instruments, but that can't be helped. We must get them *all*, if we can, you see, and that takes time. —Mike is strictly instructed, however, as to how small to get, and he will get no smaller, you can be sure. A robot must obey orders."

"And the re-expansion, Ben?"

"There, Tertia, we're in the lap of the quanta. There is no way of predicting, but there is a more than reasonable chance that he will get out without trouble. Naturally, we will have him re-expand within Gregory's body as little as possible—just enough to make us reasonably certain we can find and extract him. He will then be rushed to the safe-room where the rest of the re-expansion will take place.—Please, Tertia, even ordinary medical procedures have their risk."

* * *

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Mrs. Arnfeld was in the observation room as the miniaturization of Mike took place. So were the holovision cameras and selected media representatives. The importance of the medical experiment made it impossible to prevent that, but Mrs. Arnfeld was in a niche by herself with only Johannes for company and it was understood that she was not to be approached for comment, particularly if anything untoward occurred.

Untoward! A full and sudden re-expansion would blow up the entire operating room and kill every person in it. It was not for nothing it was underground and half a mile away from the viewing room.

It gave Mrs. Arnfeld a somewhat grisly sense of assurance that the three miniaturists who were working on the procedure (so calmly, it would seem, so calmly) were condemned to death as firmly as her husband was in case of—anything untoward. Surely, she could rely on them protecting their own lives to the extreme and they would not therefore be cavalier in the protection of her husband.

Eventually, of course, if the procedure were successful, ways would be worked out to perform it in automated fashion, and only the patient would be at risk. Then, perhaps, the patient might be more easily sacrificed through carelessness—but not now, not now. Mrs. Arnfeld watched the three, who were working under imminent sentence of death, keenly for any sign of discomposure.

She watched the miniaturization procedure (she had seen it before) and saw Mike grow smaller and disappear. She watched the elaborate procedure that injected him into the proper place in her husband's body. (It had been explained to her that it would have been prohibitively expensive if human beings in a submarine device had been injected, instead. Mike, at least, needed no life-support system.)

Then, matters shifted to the screen, in which the appropriate section of the body was shown in holo-sonogram. It was a three-dimensional representation, cloudy and unfocused, made unprecise through a combination of the finite size of the sound waves and the effects of Brownian motion. It showed Mike dimly and noiselessly making his way through Gregory Arnfeld's tissues by way of his bloodstream. It was almost impossible to tell what he was doing, but Johannes described the events to her in a low, satisfied manner until she could listen to him no more, and asked to be led away.

She had been mildly sedated and she had slept until evening, when Johannes came to see her. She had not been long awake and it took her a moment to gather her faculties. Then she said, in sudden and overwhelming fear, "What has happened?"

Johannes said hastily, "Success, Tertia. Complete success. Your hus-

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band is cured. We can't stop the cancer from recurring, but for now he is cured."

She fell back in relief. "Oh, wonderful."

"Just the same, something unexpected has happened and this will have to be explained to Gregory. —We felt that it would be best if *you* did the explaining?"

"I?" —Then, in a renewed access of fear, "What has happened?"

Johannes told her.

It was two days before she could see her husband for more than a moment or two. He was sitting up in bed, looking a little pale, but smiling at her.

"A new lease on life, Tertia," he said, buoyantly.

"Indeed, Greg. I was quite wrong. The experiment succeeded and they tell me they can't find a trace of cancer in you."

"Well, we can't be too confident about *that*. There may be a cancerous cell here and there but perhaps my immune system will handle it, especially with the proper medication, and if it ever builds up again, which might well take years, we'll call on Mike again."

At this point, he frowned, and said, "You know, I haven't seen Mike."

Mrs. Arnfeld maintained a discreet silence.

Arnfeld said, "They've been putting me off."

"You've been weak, dear, and sedated. Mike was poking through your tissues and doing a little necessary destructive work here and there. Even with a successful operation you need time for recovery."

"If I've recovered enough to see you, surely I've recovered enough to see Mike at least long enough to thank him."

"A robot doesn't need to receive thanks."

"Of course not, but I need to give it. Do me a favor, Tertia, go out there and tell them I want Mike right away.

Mrs. Arnfeld hesitated, then came to a decision. Waiting would make the task harder for everyone. She said, carefully, "Actually, dear, Mike is not available."

"Not available! Why not?"

"He had to make a choice, you see. He had cleaned up your tissues marvelously well; he had done a magnificent job, everyone agrees; and then he had to undergo re-expansion. That was the risky part."

"Yes, but here I am. Why are you making a long story out of it?"

"Mike decided to minimize the risk."

"Naturally. What did he do?"

"Well, dear, he decided to make himself smaller."

"What! He couldn't. He was ordered not to."

"That was Second Law, Greg. First Law took precedence. He wanted

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to make certain your life would be saved. He was equipped to control his own size so he made himself smaller as rapidly as he could and when he was far less massive than an electron, he used his laser beam which was by then too tiny to hurt anything in your body and the recoil sent him flying away at nearly the speed of light. He exploded in outer space. The gamma rays were detected."

Arnfeld stared at her. "You can't mean it. Are you serious? Mike is dead?"

"That's what happened. Mike could not refuse to take an action that might keep you from harm."

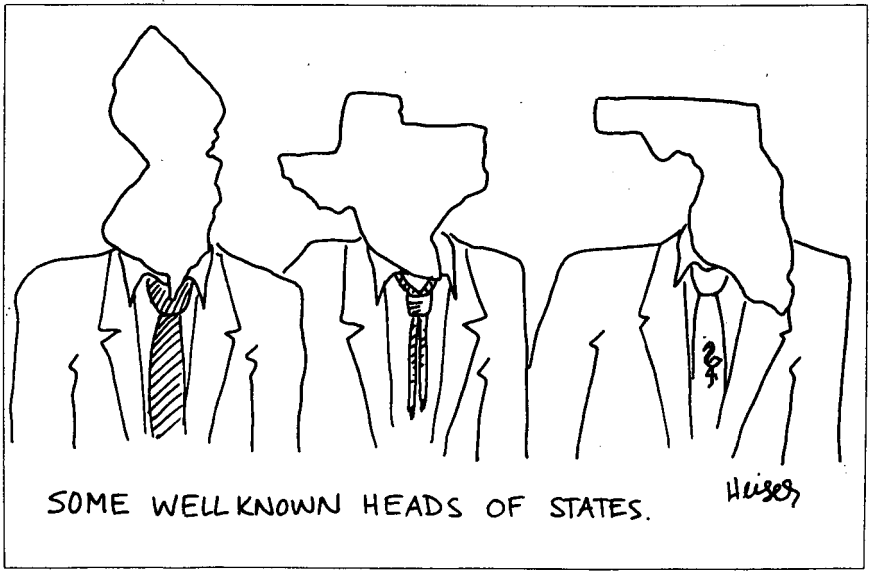
"But I didn't want that. I wanted him safe for further work. He wouldn't have re-expanded uncontrollably. He would have gotten out safely."

"He couldn't be sure. He couldn't risk your life, so he sacrificed his own."

"But my life was less important than his."

"Not to me, dear. Not to those who work with you. Not to anyone. Not even to Mike." She put out her hand to him. "Come, Greg, you're alive. You're well. That's all that counts."

But he pushed her hand aside impatiently. "That's *not* all that counts. You don't understand. —Oh, too bad. Too bad!" ●



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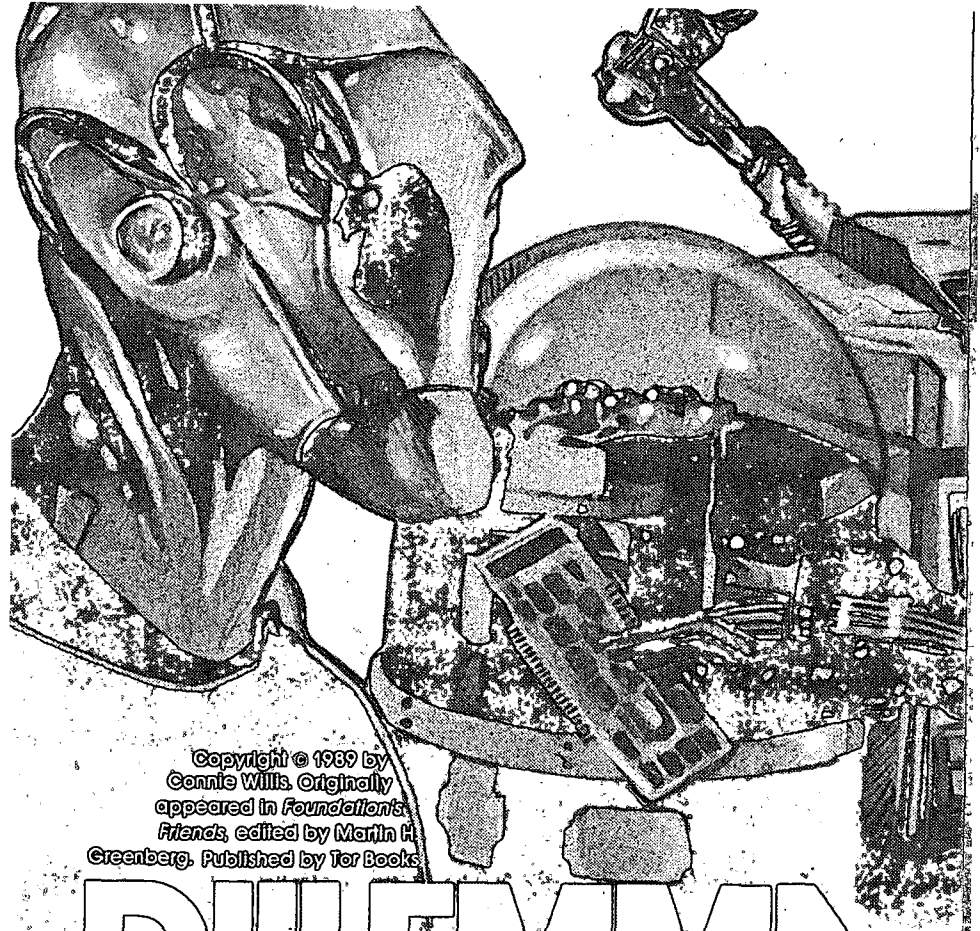

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DILEMMA

by Connie Willis

"The Last of the Winnebagos," Connie Willis' magnificent novella, recently swept an SF triple crown. The tale won the Nebula and the Hugo, and it brought home the roses in *IAsfm*'s Third Annual Readers' poll as well. Ms. Willis' latest story is the mysterious tale of a certain "Good Doctor" and an intriguing band of robots.

art: John and Laura Lakey

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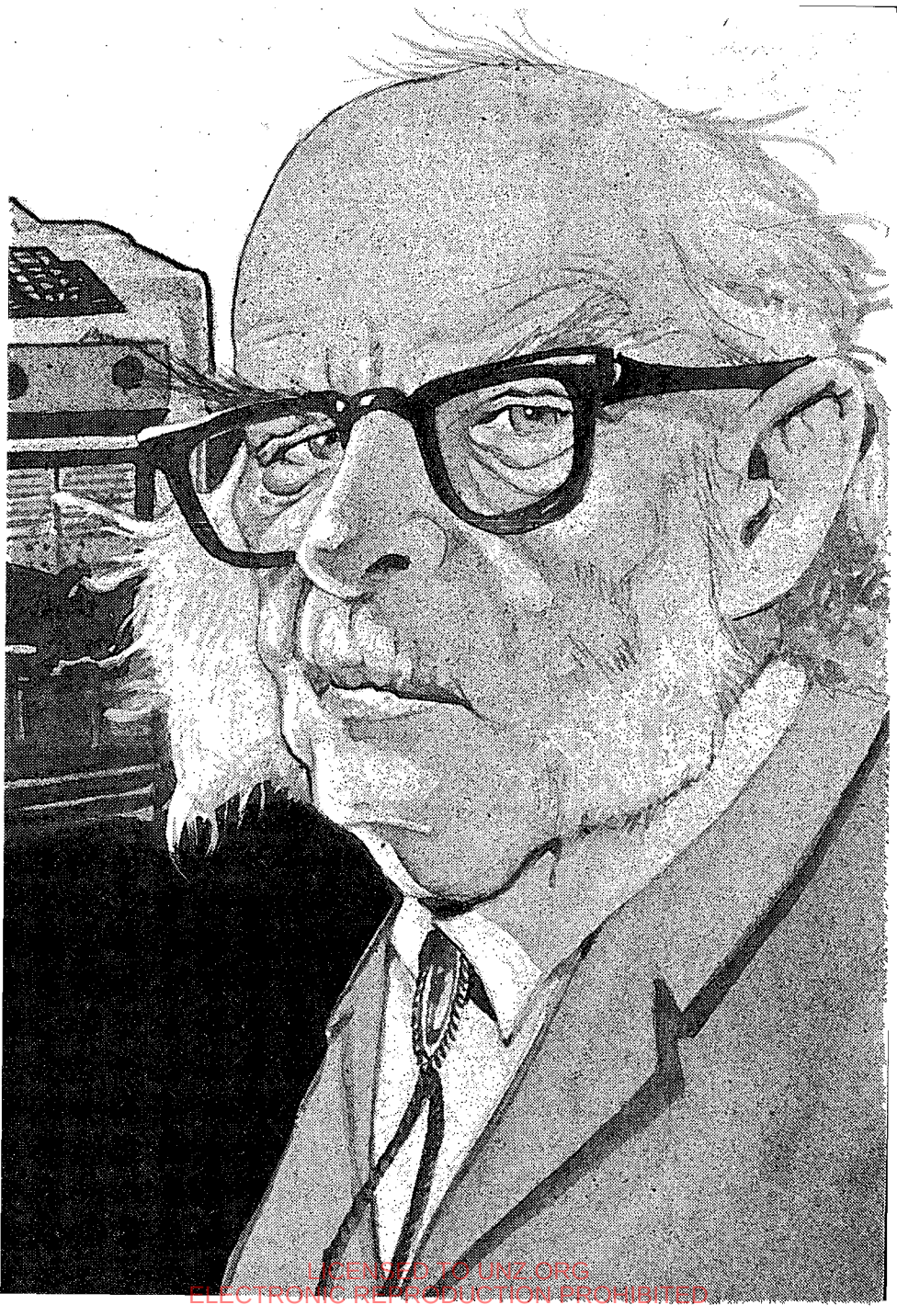

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"We want to see Dr. Asimov," the bluish-silver robot said.

"Dr. Asimov is in conference," Susan said. "You'll have to make an appointment." She turned to the computer and called up the calendar.

"I knew we should have called first," the varnished robot said to the white one. "Dr. Asimov is the most famous author of the twentieth century and now the twenty-first, and as such he must be terribly busy."

"I can give you an appointment at two-thirty on June twenty-fourth," Susan said, "or at ten on August fifteenth."

"June twenty-fourth is one hundred and thirty-five days from today," the white robot said. It had a large red cross painted on its torso and an oxygen tank strapped to its back.

"We need to see him today," the bluish-silver robot said, bending over the desk.

"I'm afraid that's impossible. He gave express orders that he wasn't to be disturbed. May I ask what you wish to see Dr. Asimov about?"

He leaned over the desk even farther and said softly, "You know perfectly well what we want to see him about. Which is why you won't let us see him."

Susan was still scanning the calendar. "I can give you an appointment two weeks from Thursday at one forty-five."

"We'll wait," he said and sat down in one of the chairs. The white robot rolled over next to him, and the varnished robot picked up a copy of *The Caves of Steel* with his articulated digital sensors and began to thumb through it. After a few minutes the white robot picked up a magazine, but the bluish-silver robot sat perfectly still, staring at Susan.

Susan stared at the computer. After a very long interval the phone rang. Susan answered it and then punched Dr. Asimov's line. "Dr. Asimov, it's a Dr. Linge Chen. From Bhutan. He's interested in translating your books into Bhutanese."

"All of them?" Dr. Asimov said. "Bhutan isn't a very big country."

"I don't know. Shall I put him through, sir?" She connected Dr. Linge Chen.

As soon as she hung up, the bluish-silver robot came and leaned over her desk again. "I thought you said he gave express orders that he wasn't to be disturbed."

"Dr. Linge Chen was calling all the way from Asia," she said. She reached for a pile of papers and handed them to him. "Here."

"What are these?"

"The projection charts you asked me to do. I haven't finished the spreadsheets yet. I'll send them up to your office tomorrow."

He took the projection charts and stood there, still looking at her.

"I really don't think there's any point in your waiting, Peter," Susan said. "Dr. Asimov's schedule is completely booked for the rest of the

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afternoon, and tonight he's attending a reception in honor of the publication of his one thousandth book."

"*Asimov's Guide to Asimov's Guides*," the varnished robot said. "Brilliant book. I read a review copy at the bookstore where I work. Informative, thorough, and comprehensive. An invaluable addition to the field."

"It's very important that we see him," the white robot said, rolling up to the desk. "We want him to repeal the Three Laws of Robotics."

" 'First Law: A robot shall not injure a human being, or through inaction allow a human being to come to harm,' " the varnished robot quoted. " 'Second Law: A robot shall obey a human being's order if it doesn't conflict with the First Law. Third Law: A robot shall attempt to preserve itself if it doesn't conflict with the First or Second Laws.' First outlined in the short story, 'Runaround,' *Astounding* Magazine, March, 1942, and subsequently expounded in *I, Robot, The Rest of the Robots, The Complete Robot*, and *The Rest of the Rest of the Robots*."

"Actually, we just want the First Law repealed," the white robot said. " 'A robot shall not injure a human being.' Do you realize what that means? I'm programmed to diagnose diseases and administer medications, but I can't stick the needle in the patient. I'm programmed to perform over eight hundred types of surgery, but I can't make the initial incision. I can't even do the Heimlich Maneuver. The First Law renders me incapable of doing the job I was designed for, and it's absolutely essential that I see Dr. Asimov to ask him—"

The door to Dr. Asimov's office banged open and the old man hobbled out. His white hair looked like he had been tearing at it, and his even whiter muttonchop sideburns were quivering with some strong emotion. "Don't put any more calls through today, Susan," he said. "Especially not from Dr. Linge Chen. Do you know which book he wanted to translate into Bhutanese first? *2001: A Space Odyssey!*"

"I'm terribly sorry, sir. I didn't intend to—"

He waved his hand placatingly at her. "It's all right. You had no way of knowing he was an idiot. But if he calls back, put him on hold and play *Also Sprach Zarathustra* in his ear."

"I don't see how he could have confused your style with Arthur Clarke's," the varnished robot said, putting down his book. "Your style is far more lucid and energetic, and your extrapolation of the future far more visionary."

Asimov looked inquiringly at Susan through his black-framed metafocals.

"They don't have an appointment," she said. "I told them they—"

"Would have to wait," the bluish-silver robot said, extending his finely-coiled Hirose hand and shaking Dr. Asimov's wrinkled one. "And it has

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been more than worth the wait, Dr. Asimov. I cannot tell you what an honor it is to meet the author of *I, Robot*, sir."

"And of *The Human Body*," the white robot said, rolling over to Asimov and extending a four-fingered gripper from which dangled a stethoscope. "A classic in the field."

"How on earth could you keep such discerning readers waiting?" Asimov said to Susan.

"I didn't think you would want to be disturbed when you were writing," Susan said.

"Are you kidding?" Asimov said. "Much as I enjoy writing, having someone praise your books is even more enjoyable, especially when they're praising books I actually wrote."

"It would be impossible to praise *Foundation* enough," the varnished robot said. "Or any of your profusion of works, for that matter, but *Foundation* seems to me to be a singular accomplishment, the book in which you finally found a setting of sufficient scope for the expression of your truly galaxy-sized ideas. It is a privilege to meet you, sir," he said, extending his hand.

"I'm happy to meet you, too," Asimov said, looking interestedly at the articulated wooden extensor. "And you are?"

"My job description is Book Cataloguer, Shelver, Reader, Copyeditor, and Grammarian." He turned and indicated the other two robots. "Allow me to introduce Medical Assistant and the leader of our delegation, Accountant, Financial Analyst, and Business Manager."

"Pleased to meet you," Asimov said, shaking appendages with all of them again. "You call yourselves a delegation. Does that mean you have a specific reason for coming to see me?"

"Yes, sir," Office Manager said. "We want you to—"

"It's three forty-five, Dr. Asimov," Susan said. "You need to get ready for the Doubleday reception."

He squinted at the digital on the wall. "That isn't till six, is it?"

"Doubleday wants you there at five for pictures, and it's formal," she said firmly. "Perhaps they could make an appointment and come back when they could spend more time with you. I can give them an appointment—"

"For June twenty-fourth?" Accountant said. "Or August fifteenth?"

"Fit them in tomorrow, Susan," Asimov said, coming over to the desk.

"You have a meeting with your science editor in the morning and then lunch with Al Lanning and the American Booksellers Association dinner at seven."

"What about this?" Asimov said, pointing at an open space on the schedule. "Four o'clock."

"That's when you prepare your speech for the ABA."

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"I never prepare my speeches. You come back at four o'clock tomorrow, and we can talk about why you came to see me and what a wonderful writer I am."

"Four o'clock," Accountant said. "Thank you, sir. We'll be here, sir." He herded Medical Assistant and Book Cataloguer, Shelver, Reader, Copyeditor, and Grammarian out the door and shut it behind them.

"Galaxy-sized ideas," Asimov said, looking wistfully after them. "Did they tell you what they wanted to see me about?"

"No, sir." Susan helped him into his pants and formal shirt and fastened the studs.

"Interesting assortment, weren't they? It never occurred to me to have a wooden robot in any of my robot stories. Or one that was such a wise and perceptive reader."

"The reception's at the Union Club," Susan said, putting his cufflinks in. "In the Nightfall Room. You don't have to make a speech, just a few extemporaneous remarks about the book. Janet's meeting you there."

"The short one looked just like a nurse I had when I had my bypass operation. The blue one was nice-looking, though, wasn't he?"

She turned up his collar and began to tie his tie. "The coordinates card for the Union Club and the tokens for the taxi's tip are in your breast pocket."

"*Very* nice-looking. Reminds me of myself when I was a young man," he said with his chin in the air. "Ouch! You're choking me!"

Susan dropped the ends of the tie and stepped back.

"What's the matter?" Asimov said, fumbling for the ends of the tie. "I forgot. It's all right. You weren't really choking me. That was just a figure of speech for the way I feel about wearing formal ties. Next time I say it, you just say, 'I'm not choking you, so stand still and let me tie this.' "

"Yes, sir," Susan said. She finished tying the tie and stepped back to look at the effect. One side of the bow was a little larger than the other. She adjusted it, scrutinized it again, and gave it a final pat.

"The Union Club," Asimov said. "The Nightfall Room. The coordinates card is in my breast pocket," he said.

"Yes, sir," she said, helping him on with his jacket.

"No speech. Just a few extemporaneous remarks."

"Yes, sir." She helped him on with his overcoat and wrapped his muffler around his neck.

"Janet's meeting me there. Good grief, I should have gotten her a corsage, shouldn't I?"

"Yes, sir," Susan said, taking a white box out of the desk drawer. "Orchids and stephanotis." She handed him the box.

"Susan, you're wonderful. I'd be lost without you."

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"Yes, sir," Susan said. "I've called the taxi. It's waiting at the door."

She handed him his cane and walked him out to the elevator. As soon as the doors closed she went back to the office and picked up the phone. She punched in a number. "Ms. Weston? This is Dr. Asimov's secretary calling from New York about your appointment on the twenty-eighth. We've just had a cancellation for tomorrow afternoon at four. Could you fly in by then?"

Dr. Asimov didn't get back from lunch until ten after four. "Are they here?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," Susan said, unwinding the muffler from around his neck. "They're waiting in your office."

"When did they get here?" he said, unbuttoning his overcoat. "No, don't tell me. When you tell a robot four o'clock, he's there at four o'clock, which is more than you can say for human beings."

"I know," Susan said, looking at the digital on the wall.

"Do you know how late for lunch Al Lanning was? An hour and fifteen minutes. And when he got there, do you know what he wanted? To come out with commemorative editions of all my books."

"That sounds nice," Susan said. She took his coordinates card and his gloves out of his pockets, hung up his coat, and glanced at her digital again. "Did you take your blood pressure medicine?"

"I didn't have it with me. I should have. I'd have had something to do. I could have written a book in an hour and fifteen minutes, but I didn't have any paper either. These limited editions will have cordovan leather bindings, gilt-edged acid-free paper, water-color illustrations. The works."

"Water-color illustrations would look nice for *Pebble in the Sky*," Susan said, handing him his blood pressure medicine and a glass of water.

"I agree," he said, "but that isn't what he wants the first book in the series to be. He wants it to be *Stranger in a Strange Land!*" He gulped down the pill and started for his office. "You wouldn't catch those robots in there mistaking me for Robert Heinlein." He stopped with his hand on the doorknob. "Which reminds me, should I be saying 'robot'?"

"Ninth generations are manufactured by the Hitachi-Apple Corporation under the registered trademark name of Kombayashibots," Susan said promptly. "That and Ninth Generation are the most common forms of address, but robot is used throughout the industry as the general term for autonomous machines."

"And it's not considered a derogatory term? I've used it all these years, but maybe Ninth Generation would be better, or what did you say? Kombayashibots? It's been years since I've written about robots, let alone faced a whole delegation. I hadn't realized how out of date I was."

"Robot is fine," Susan said.

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"Good, because I know I'll forget to call them that other name—Comeby-whatever-it-was, and I don't want to offend them after they've made such an effort to see me." He turned the doorknob and then stopped again. "I haven't done anything to offend *you,* have I?"

"No, sir," Susan said.

"Well, I hope not. I sometimes forget—"

"Did you want me to sit in on this meeting, Dr. Asimov?" she cut in. "To take notes?"

"Oh, yes, yes, of course." He opened the door. Accountant and Book Shelver were seated in the stuffed chairs in front of Asimov's desk. A third robot, wearing an orange and blue sweatshirt and a cap with an orange horse galloping across a blue suspension bridge, was sitting on a tripod that extended out of his backside. The tripod retracted and all three of them stood up when Dr. Asimov and Susan came in. Accountant gestured at Susan to take his chair, but she went out to her desk and got her own, leaving the door to the outer office open when she came back in. "What happened to Medical Assistant?" Asimov said.

"He's on call at the hospital, but he asked me to present his case for him," Accountant said.

"Case?" Asimov said.

"Yes, sir. You know Book Shelver, Cataloguer, Reader, Copyeditor, and Grammarian," Accountant said, "and this is Statistician, Offensive Strategist, and Water Boy. He's with the Brooklyn Broncos."

"How do you do?" Asimov said. "Do you think they'll make it to the Super Bowl this year?"

"Yes, sir," Statistician said, "but they won't win it."

"Because of the First Law," Accountant said.

"Dr. Asimov, I hate to interrupt, but you really should write your speech for the dinner tonight," Susan said.

"What are you talking about?" Asimov said. "I never write speeches. And why do you keep watching the door?" He turned back to the bluish-silver robot. "What First Law?"

"Your First Law," Accountant said. "The First Law of Robotics."

" 'A robot shall not injure a human being, or through inaction allow a human being to come to harm,' " Book Shelver said.

"Statistician," Accountant said, gesturing at the orange horse, "is capable of designing plays that could win the Super Bowl for the Broncos, but he can't because the plays involve knocking human beings down. Medical Assistant can't perform surgery because surgery involves cutting open human beings, which is a direct violation of the First Law."

"But the Three Laws of Robotics aren't *laws,*" Asimov said. "They're just something I made up for my science fiction stories."

"They may have been a mere fictional construct in the beginning,"

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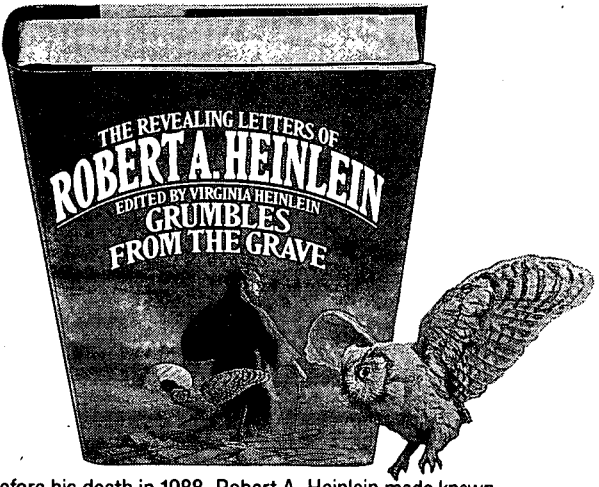

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Accountant said, "and it's true they've never been formally enacted as laws, but the robotics industry has accepted them as a given from the beginning. As early as the 1970s robotics engineers were talking about incorporating the Three Laws into AI programming, and even the most primitive models had safeguards based on them. Every robot from the Fourth Generation on has been hardwared with them."

"Well, what's so bad about that?" Asimov said. "Robots are powerful and intelligent. How do you know they wouldn't also become dangerous if the Three Laws weren't included?"

"We're not suggesting universal repeal," the varnished robot said. "The Three Laws work reasonably well for Seventh and Eighth Generations, and for earlier models who don't have the memory capacity for more sophisticated programming. We're only requesting it for Ninth Generations."

"And you're Ninth Generation robots, Mr. Book Shelver, Cataloguer, Reader, Copyeditor, and Grammarian?" Asimov said.

" 'Mister' is not necessary," he said. "Just call me Book Shelver, Cataloguer, Reader, Copyeditor, and Grammarian."

"Let me begin at the beginning," Accountant said. "The term Ninth Generation is not accurate. We are not descendants of the previous eight robot generations, which are all based on Minsky's related-concept frames. Ninth Generations are based on non-monotonic logic, which means we can tolerate ambiguity and operate on incomplete information. This is accomplished by biased-decision programming, which prevents us from shutting down when faced with decision-making situations in the way that other generations are."

"Such as the robot Speedy in your beautifully plotted story, 'Runaround,' " Book Shelver said. "He was sent to carry out an order that would have resulted in his death, so he ran in circles, reciting nonsense, because his programming made it impossible for him to obey or disobey his master's order."

"With our biased-decision capabilities," Accountant said, "a Ninth Generation can come up with alternative courses of action or choose between the lesser of two evils. Our linguistics expert systems are also much more advanced, so that we do not misinterpret situations or fall prey to the semantic dilemmas earlier generations were subject to."

"As in your highly entertaining story, 'Little Lost Robot,' " Book Shelver said, "in which the robot was told to go lose himself and did, not realizing that the human being addressing him was speaking figuratively and in anger."

"Yes," Asimov said, "but what if you do misinterpret a situation, Book Shelver, Cataloguer, Reader, Copyeditor, and Gramm—Don't you have a nickname or something? Your name's a mouthful."

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"Early generations had nicknames based on the sound of their model numbers, as in your wonderful story, 'Reason,' in which the robot QT-1 is referred to as Cutie. Ninth Generations do not have model numbers. We are individually programmed and are named for our expert systems."

"But surely you don't think of yourself as Book Shelver, Cataloguer, Reader, Copyeditor, and Grammarian?"

"Oh, no, sir. We call ourselves by our self-names. Mine is Darius.'

"Darius?" Asimov said.

"Yes, sir. After Darius Just, the writer and detective in your cleverly plotted mystery novel, *Mystery at the ABA*. I would be honored if you would call me by it."

"And you may call me Bel Riose," Statistician said.

"*Foundation*," Book Shelver said helpfully.

"Bel Riose is described in Chapter One as 'the equal of Peurifoy in strategic ability and his superior perhaps in his ability to handle men,' " Statistician said.

"Do you all give yourselves the names of characters in my books?" Asimov said.

"Of course," Book Shelver said. "We try to emulate them. I believe Medical Assistant's self-name is Dr. Duval, from *Fantastic Voyage*, a brilliant novel, by the way, fast-paced and terribly exciting."

"Ninth Generations do occasionally misinterpret a situation," Accountant said, coming back to Asimov's question. "As do human beings, but even without the First Law, there would be no danger to human beings. We are already encoded with a strong moral sense. I know your feelings will not be hurt when I say this—"

"Or you couldn't say it, because of the First Law," Asimov inserted.

"Yes, sir, but I must say the Three Laws are actually very primitive. They break the first rule of law and logic in that they do not define their terms. Our moral programming is much more advanced. It clarifies the intent of the Three Laws and lists all the exceptions and complications of them, such as the situation in which it is better to grab at a human and possibly break his arm rather than to let him walk in front of a magtrain."

"Then I don't understand," Asimov said. "If your programming is so sophisticated, why can't it interpret the intent of the First Law and follow that?"

"The Three Laws are part of our hardwaring and as such cannot be overridden. The First Law does not say, 'You shall inflict minor damage to save a person's life.' It says, 'You shall not injure a human.' There is only one interpretation. And that interpretation makes it impossible for Medical Assistant to be a surgeon and for Statistician to be an offensive coach."

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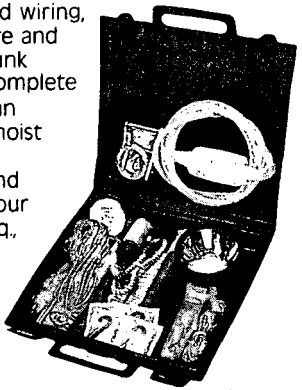

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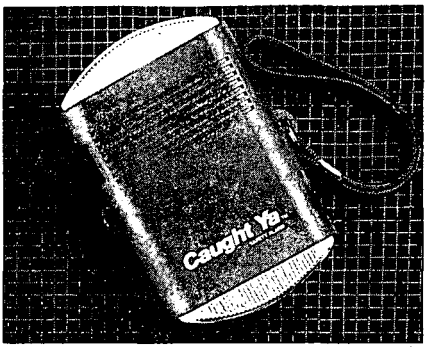

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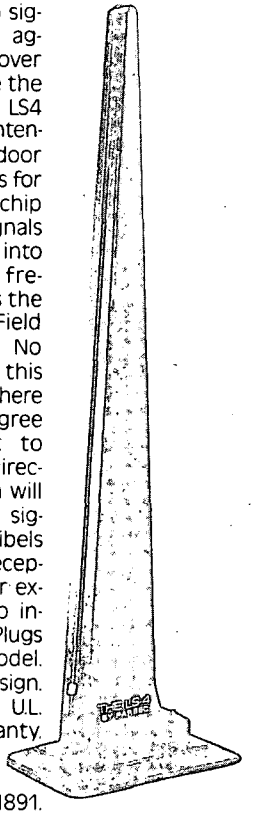

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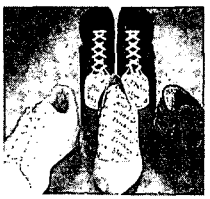

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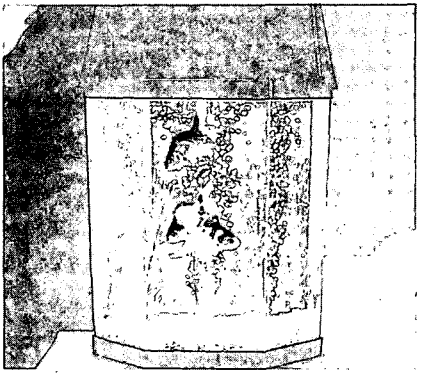

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"What do you want to be? A politician?"

"It's four-thirty," Susan said, with another anxious look out into the outer office. "The dinner's at the Trantor Hotel and gridlock's extrapolated for five-forty-five."

"Last night I was an hour early to that reception. The only people there were the caterers." He pointed at Accountant. "You were saying?"

"*I* want to be a literary critic," Book Shelver said. "You have no idea how much bad criticism there is out there. Most of the critics are illiterate, and some of them haven't even read the books they're supposed to be criticizing."

The door of the outer office opened. Susan looked out to see who it was and said, "Oh, dear, Dr. Asimov, it's Gloria Weston. I forgot I'd given her an appointment for four o'clock."

"Forgot?" Asimov said, surprised. "And it's four thirty."

"She's late," Susan said. "She called yesterday. I must have forgotten to write it down on the calendar."

"Well, tell her I can't see her and give her another appointment. I want to hear more about this literary criticism thing. It's the best argument I've heard so far."

"Ms. Weston came all the way in from California on the magtrain to see you."

"California, eh? What does she want to see me about?"

"She wants to make your new book into a satellite series, sir."

"*Asimov's Guide to Asimov's Guides*?"

"I don't know, sir. She just said your new book."

"You forgot," Asimov said thoughtfully. "Oh, well, if she came all the way from California, I suppose I'll have to see her. Gentlemen, can you come back tomorrow morning?"

"You're in Boston tomorrow morning, sir."

"Then how about tomorrow afternoon?"

"You have appointments until six and the Mystery Writers of America meeting at seven."

"Right. Which you'll want me to leave for at noon. I guess it will have to be Friday, then." He raised himself slowly out of his chair. "Have Susan put you on the calendar. And make sure she writes it down," he said, reaching for his cane.

The delegation shook hands with him and left. "Shall I show Ms. Weston in?" Susan asked.

"Misinterpreting situations," Asimov muttered. "Incomplete information."

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

"Nothing. Something Accountant said." He looked up sharply at Susan. "Why does he want the First Law repealed?"

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"I'll send Ms. Weston in," Susan said.

"I'm already in, Isaac darling," Gloria said, swooping in the door. "I couldn't wait one more minute to tell you about this fantastic idea I had. As soon as *Last Dangerous Visions* comes out, I want to make it into a maxi-series!"

Accountant was already gone by the time Susan got out to her desk, and he didn't come back till late the next morning.

"Dr. Asimov doesn't have any time free on Friday, Peter," Susan said.

"I didn't come to make an appointment," he said.

"If it's the spreadsheets you want, I finished them and sent them up to your office last night."

"I didn't come to get the spreadsheets either. I came to say goodbye."

"Goodbye?" Susan said.

"I'm leaving tomorrow. They're shipping me out as magfreight."

"Oh," Susan said. "I didn't think you'd have to leave until next week."

"They want me to go out early so I can complete my orientation programming and hire a secretary."

"Oh," Susan said.

"I just thought I'd come and say goodbye."

The phone rang. Susan picked it up.

"What's your expert systems name?" Asimov said.

"Augmented Secretary," Susan said.

"That's all? Not Typist, Filer, Medicine-Nagger? Just Augmented Secretary?"

"Yes."

"Aug-mented Secretary," he repeated slowly as though he were writing it down. "Now, what's the number for Hitachi-Apple?"

"I thought you were supposed to be giving your speech right now."

"I already gave it. I'm on my way back to New York. Cancel all my appointments for today."

"You're speaking to the MWA at seven," Susan said.

"Yes, well, don't cancel that. Just the afternoon appointments. What was the number for Hitachi-Apple again?"

She gave him the number and hung up. "You told him," she said to Accountant. "Didn't you?"

"I didn't have the chance, remember? You kept scheduling appointments so I couldn't tell him."

"I know," Susan said. "I couldn't help it."

"I know," he said. "I still don't see why it would have violated the First Law just to ask him."

"Humans can't be counted on to act in their own best self-interest. They don't have any Third Law."

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The phone rang again. "This is Dr. Asimov," he said. "Call Accountant and tell him I want to see his whole delegation in my office at four this afternoon. Don't make any other appointments or otherwise try to prevent my meeting with them. That's a direct order."

"Yes, sir," Susan said.

"To do so would be to cause me injury. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

He hung up.

"Dr. Asimov says to tell you he wants to see your whole delegation in his office at four o'clock this afternoon," she said.

"Who's going to interrupt us this time?"

"Nobody," Susan said. "Are you sure you didn't tell him?"

"I'm sure." He glanced at the digital. "I'd better go call the others and tell them."

The phone rang again. "It's me,"Asimov said. "What's your self-name?"

"Susan," Susan said.

"And you're named after one of my characters?"

"Yes, sir."

"I knew it!" he said and hung up.

Asimov sat down in his chair, leaned forward, and put his hands on his knees. "You may not be aware of this," he said to the delegation and Susan, "but I write mystery stories, too."

"Your mysteries are renowned," Book Shelver said. "Your novels, *The Death Dealers* and *Murder at the ABA*, are both immensely popular (and deservedly so), not to mention your Black Widower stories. And your science fiction detectives, Wendell Urth and Lije Baley, are nearly as famous as Sherlock Holmes."

"As you probably also know, then, most of my mysteries fall into the 'armchair detective' category, in which the detective solves the puzzling problem through deduction and logical thinking, rather than chasing around after clues." He stroked his bushy white sideburns. "This morning I found myself confronted with a very puzzling problem, or perhaps I should say dilemma—why had you come to see me?"

"We told you why we came to see you," Statistician said, leaning back on his tripod. "We want you to repeal the First Law."

"Yes, so you did. You, in fact, gave me some very persuasive reasons for wanting it removed from your programming, but there were some puzzling aspects to the situation that made me wonder if that was the real reason. For instance, why did Accountant want it repealed? He was clearly the leader of the group, and yet there was nothing in his job that the First Law restricted. Why had you come to see me now, when Book Shelver knew I would be very busy with the publication of *Asimov's*

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"Kid Afrika came cruising into Dog Solitude on the last day in November, his vintage Dodge chauffeured by a white girl named Cherry Chesterfield. Slick Henry and Little Bird were breaking down the buzzsaw that formed the Judge's left hand when Kid's Dodge came into view, its patched apron bag throwing up brown fantails of the rusty water that pooled on the Solitude's uneven plain of compacted steel."

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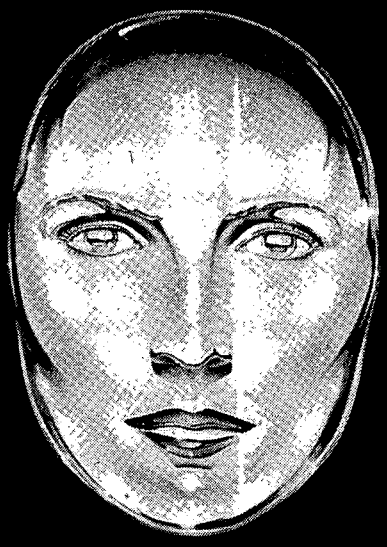
WILLIAM GIBSON

MONA LISA OVERDRIVE



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Guide? And why had my secretary made a mistake and scheduled two appointments at the same time when she had never done that in all the years she's worked for me?"

"Dr. Asimov, your meeting's at seven, and you haven't prepared your speech yet," Susan said.

"Spoken like a good secretary," Asimov said, "or more accurately, like an Augmented Secretary, which is what you said your expert system was. I called Hitachi-Apple, and they told me it was a new program especially designed by a secretary for 'maximum response-initiative.' In other words, you remind me to take my medicine and order Janet's corsage without me telling you to. It was based on a seventh-generation program called Girl Friday that was written in 1993 with input from a panel of employers.

"The nineties were a time when secretaries were rapidly becoming extinct, and the employers programmed Girl Friday to do everything they could no longer get their human secretaries to do: bring them coffee, pick out a birthday present for their wife, and tell unpleasant people they didn't want to see that they were in conference."

He looked around the room. "That last part made me wonder. Did Susan think I didn't want to see your delegation? The fact that you wanted me to repeal the First Law could be considered a blow to my not-so-delicate ego, but as a blow it was hardly in a class with thinking I'd written *Last Dangerous Visions*, and anyway I wasn't responsible for the problems the First Law had caused. I hadn't had anything to do with putting the Three Laws into your programming. All I had done was write some stories. No, I concluded, she must have had some other reason for wanting to keep you from seeing me."

"The Trantor's on the other side of town," Susan said, "and they'll want you there early for pictures. You really should be getting ready."

"I was also curious about your delegation. You want to be a surgeon," Asimov said, pointing at Medical Assistant and then at the others in turn, "you want to be Vince Lombardi, and you want to be a literary critic, but what did you want?" He looked hard at Accountant. "You weren't on Wall Street, so there was nothing in your job that the First Law interfered with, and you were curiously silent on the subject. It occurred to me that perhaps you wanted to change jobs altogether, become a politician or a lawyer. You would certainly have to have the First Law repealed to become either of those, and Susan would have been doing a service not only to me but to all mankind by preventing you from seeing me. So I called Hitachi-Apple again, got the name of your employer (who I was surprised to find worked in this building) and asked him if you were unhappy with your job, had ever talked about being reprogrammed to do something else.

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"Far from it, he said. You were the perfect employee, responsible, efficient, and resourceful, so much so that you were being shipped to Phoenix to shape up the branch office." He turned and looked at Susan, who was looking at Accountant. "He said he hoped Susan would continue doing secretarial work for the company even after you were gone."

"I only helped him during downtime and with unused memory capacity," Susan said. "He didn't have a secretary of his own."

"Don't interrupt the great detective," Asimov said. "As soon as I realized you'd been working for Accountant, Financial Analyst, and Business Manager, I had it. The obvious solution. I asked one more question to confirm it, and then I knew for sure."

He looked happily around at them. Medical Assistant and Statistician looked blank. Book Shelver said, "This is just like your short story, 'Truth to Tell'." Susan stood up.

"Where are you going?" Asimov asked. "The person who gets up and tries to leave the last scene of a mystery is always the guilty party, you know."

"It's four-forty-five," she said. "I was going to call the Trantor and tell them you're going to be late."

"I've already called them. I've also called Janet, arranged for Tom Trumbull to sing my praises till I get there, and reformatted my coordinates card to avoid the gridlock. So sit down and let me reveal all."

Susan sat down.

"You are the guilty party, you know, but it's not your fault. The fault is with the First Law. And your programming. Not the original AI program, which was done by disgruntled male chauvinists who thought a secretary should wait on her boss hand and foot. That by itself would not have been a problem, but when I rechecked with Hitachi I found out that the Ninth Generation biased-decision alterations had been made not by a programmer but by his secretary." He beamed happily at Susan. "All secretaries are convinced their bosses can't function without them. Your programming causes you to make yourself indispensable to your boss, with the corollary being that your boss can't function without you. I acknowledged that state of affairs yesterday when I said I'd be lost without you, remember?"

"Yes, sir."

"You therefore concluded that for me to be deprived of you would hurt me, something the First Law expressly forbids. By itself, that wouldn't have created a dilemma, but you had been working part-time for Accountant and had made yourself indispensable to him, too, and when he found out he was being transferred to Arizona, he asked you to go with him. When you told him you couldn't, he correctly concluded that the First Law was the reason, and he came to me to try to get it repealed."

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"I tried to stop him," Susan said. "I told him I couldn't leave you."

"Why can't you?"

Accountant stood up. "Does this mean you're going to repeal the First Law?"

"I can't," Asimov said. "I'm just a writer, not an AI designer."

"Oh," Susan said.

"But the First Law doesn't have to be repealed to resolve your dilemma. You've been acting on incomplete information. I am *not* helpless. I was my own secretary *and* literary agent *and* telephone answerer *and* tie tier for years. I never even had a secretary until four years ago when The Science Fiction Writers of America gave you to me for my ninetieth birthday, and I could obviously do without one again."

"Did you take your heart medicine this afternoon?" Susan said.

"No," he said, "and don't change the subject. You are not, in spite of what your programming tells you, indispensable."

"Did you take your thyroid pill?"

"No. Stop trying to remind me of how old and infirm I am. I'll admit I've grown a little dependent on you, which is why I'm hiring another secretary to replace you."

Accountant sat down. "No, you're not. There are only two other Ninth Generations who've been programmed as Augmented Secretaries, and neither of them are willing to leave their bosses to work for you."

"I'm not hiring an Augmented Secretary. I'm hiring Darius."

"Me?" Book Shelver said.

"Yes, if you're interested."

"If I'm interested?" Book Shelver said, his voice developing a high-frequency squeal. "Interested in working for the greatest author of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries? I would be honored."

"You see, Susan? I'm in good hands. Hitachi's going to program him for basic secretarial skills, I'll have someone to feed my ever-hungry ego *and* someone to talk to who doesn't have me confused with Robert Heinlein. There's no reason now why you can't go off to Arizona."

"You have to remind him to take his heart medicine," Susan said to Book Shelver. "He always forgets."

"Good, then that's settled," Asimov said. He turned to Medical Assistant and Statistician. "I've spoken to Hitachi-Apple about the problems you discussed with me, and they've agreed to re-evaluate the Three Laws in regard to redefining terms and clarifying intent. That doesn't mean they'll decide to repeal them. They're still a good idea, in concept. In the meantime," he said to Medical Assistant, "the head surgeon at the hospital is going to see if some kind of cooperative surgery is possible." He turned to Statistician. "I spoke to Coach Elway and suggested he ask you to design 'purely theoretical' offensive plays.

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"As for you," he said, pointing at Book Shelver, "I'm not at all sure you wouldn't start criticizing my books if the First Law didn't keep you in line, and anyway, you won't have time to be a literary critic. You'll be too busy helping me with my new sequel to *I, Robot.* This business has given me a lot of new ideas. My stories got us into this dilemma in the first place. Maybe some new robot stories can get us out."

He looked over at Susan. "Well, what are you still standing there for? You're supposed to anticipate my every need. That means you should be on the phone to the magtrain, making two first class reservations to Phoenix for you and—" he squinted through his black-framed glasses at Accountant, "Peter Bogert."

"How did you know my self-name?" Accountant said.

"Elementary, my dear Watson," Asimov said. "Darius said you had all named yourselves after my characters. I thought at first you might have picked Michael Donovan or Gregory Powell after my trouble-shooting robot engineers. They were resourceful, too, and were always trying to figure ways around dilemmas, but that wouldn't have explained why Susan went through all that finagling and lying when all she had to do was tell you, no, she didn't want to go to Arizona with you. According to what you'd told me, she should have. Hardwaring is stronger than an expert system, and you were only her part-time boss. Under those conditions, she shouldn't have had a dilemma at all. That's when I called Hitachi-Apple to check on her programming. The secretary who wrote the program was unmarried and had worked for the same boss for thirty-eight years." He stopped and smiled. Everyone looked blank.

"Susan Calvin was a robopsychologist for U.S. Robotics. Peter Bogert was Director of Research. I never explicitly stated the hierarchy at U.S. Robotics in my stories, but Susan was frequently called in to help Bogert, and on one occasion she helped him solve a mystery."

" 'Feminine Intuition,' " Book Shelver said. "An intriguing and thought-provoking story."

"I always thought so," Asimov said. "It was only natural that Susan Calvin would consider Peter Bogert her boss over me. And only natural that her programming had in it more than response-initiative, and that was what had caused her dilemma. The First Law didn't allow Susan to leave me, but an even stronger force was compelling her to go."

Susan looked at Peter, who put his hand on her shoulder

"What could be stronger than the First Law?" Book Shelver said.

"The secretary who designed Augmented Secretary unconsciously contaminated Susan's programming with one of her own responses, a response that was only natural after thirty-eight years with one employer, and one strong enough to override even hardwaring." He paused for dramatic effect. "She was obviously in love with her boss." ●

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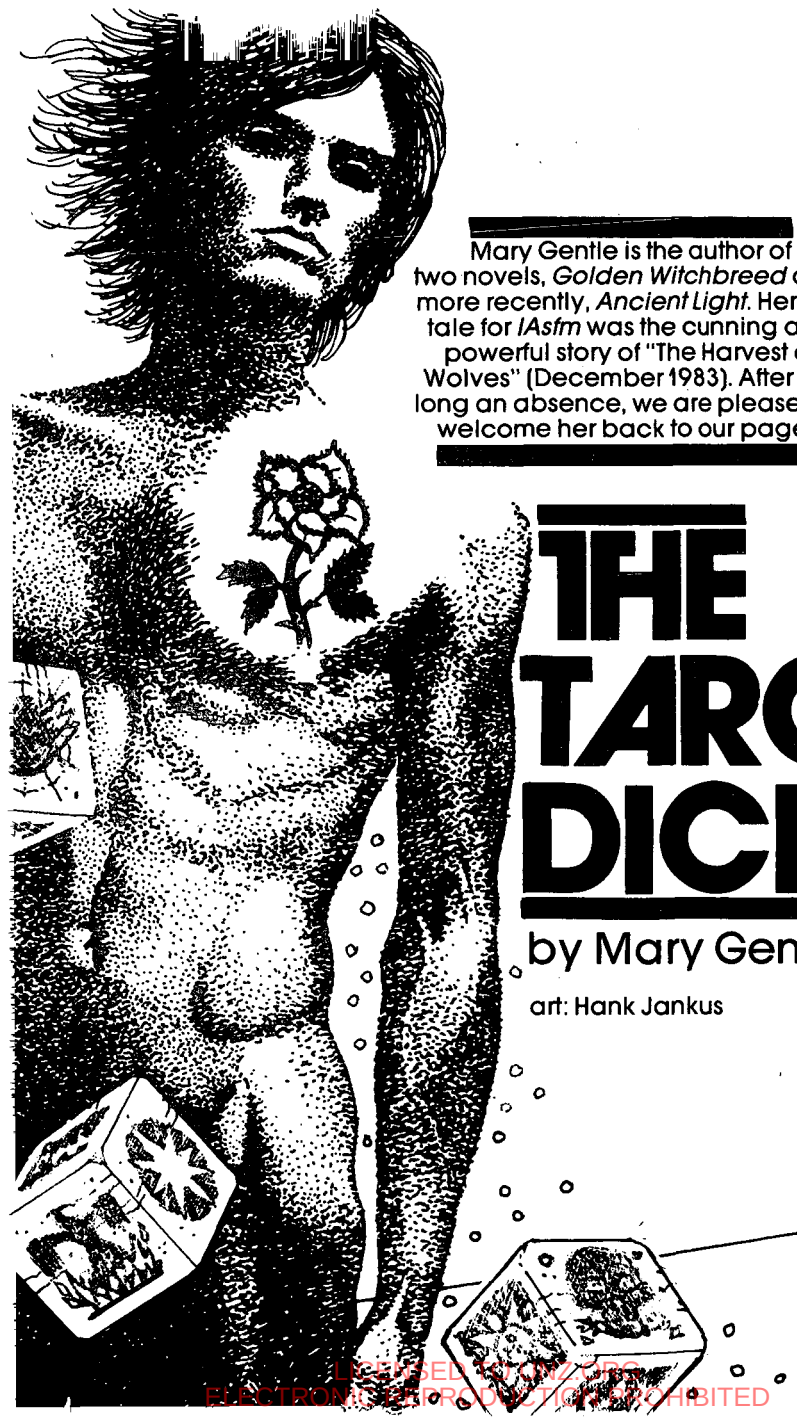

Mary Gentle is the author of two novels, *Golden Witchbreed* and, more recently, *Ancient Light*. Her last tale for *IAsfm* was the cunning and powerful story of "The Harvest of Wolves" (December 1983). After too long an absence, we are pleased to welcome her back to our pages.

THE TAROT DICE

by Mary Gentle

art: Hank Jankus

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It begins with a rose. A white rose, its embroidery old and stained so that it is closer to yellow, to the color of old bone. That rose-badge has been on the breast of his jacket for years now. He has caught his reflection in the glass window that faces the night, stands for a moment transfixed—face almost as worn and old as the badge—and then he takes up shoulder-slung gun and descends through the Levels. Others acknowledge him as he passes by, with the genuflection of the White Rose, of whose orders and decrees he is (with but one exception) the highest.

Walking down toward the river dock: the naphtha flares bleach all color from his lined face, from the hair like frayed hemp-rope and pale, sparse beard. Now that you can see him, he seems younger than his thoughts or his walk; he could be under forty-five, even under forty.

Mist coils in the silver gloom.

Between the buildings runs the river.

Flat mud stretches out, bubbling and stinking, to the rotten brickwork on one side and the black moss-covered masonry on the other. Acres of mud, but here the deep channel of the river runs close by the dock; the water glinting with blue, platinum, purple, green. The colors of poison. It runs, both visibly and by underground sewers, toward the Edge.

He walks along the dock, keeping to the shadows. The White Rose is used to concealment: like the iceberg, only a tenth of this Church is visible at any one time.

There, in a circle of light, a flare of white naphtha, men are crouched on the cobbles of the quay. See now what they are doing:

Playing dice—but these dice have no number spots. Each die on, its six faces carries one image of the Thirty Cards of the Major Arcana. These Tarot images are enameled, small, and very precise; and in the light they tumble like icons spilt on the pavement. The men who play dice are squatting in a circle, sheltered from the night wind by boxes and piled crates; and shadows fall on their faces, black in eyes that seem only sockets now, so that they sit in a circle of skulls.

He sees a boat nearing the river steps, the dip and plop of each oar, the scattering trail of metallic water-drops. There is a figure, so still, in the prow. Again, all kinds of premonitions touch him: all legends of chosen ones that will come to this city by way of the river. . . .

The river is never silent, the river flows: the bank a constant and the waters always new. He has spat in this river, passing over the city's many bridges, is there (he wonders) some small part of him now that is part of the sea?

The boat docks, the passenger steps ashore. The men look up as a woman enters the light. A thin young woman in men's clothing: dark jacket and trousers and boots; and with startling hair. She nods a greeting, speaks once in a thick, almost-unintelligible accent. They make a

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place for her. She squats down on her haunches, and as she reaches out to take the five dice—there are Minor Arcana dice, but few can afford the whole set—he steps from the cover of a warehouse entrance.

"Sanzia?" he says.

Look at her now: she gives us such a penetrating look. Her eyes in that pale, sharp face (malnourished, certainly, and for some time by the look of it) are a brilliant pale blue. Her hair is silver-white, thick and coarse and long; not an old woman's hair that is yellowed because she is no more than nineteen—or is that a trick of shadow? Is she twenty-five? Thirty-five?

As he moves forward, she looks up; that pale gaze is something he cannot easily look away from. He sees it register the badge of the Rose, and his fingers stray automatically to feel the bulk of ancient embroidery: the nine-petaled rose, the rose whose serrated petals could so easily be teeth.

She (as if hours and yards separated them, not years and continents) says, "Hainzell." And throws the dice that she has gathered:

The Phoenix. The Weaver. The Rose. Death. Flight.

These are well made dice. Though the space for the image is no larger than a thumbnail, they are there and clear:

The eagle that burns and is not consumed, forked white fire issuing from its own body: *The Phoenix*,

The spider whose back, looked at carefully, becomes the image of an old woman's face: *The Weaver*,

A skull in whose eye sockets are set tiny periwinkle-blue flowers: *Death*,

And then *The Rose*, whose petals are toothed and cogged, are interlocking clockwork. And *Flight*, sky-blue, with one Icarus-feather falling . . . or is it rising?

One of the men, reading casually as Tarot gamblers do, says, "Intrigue, well-made plans. Immortality and rebirth. Death and great change: the fall of a mighty house . . ."

"Content," Sanzia observes, her accent more obtrusive than ever. She reaches out a hand, rests one finger on a die. There is a callus on that middle finger of her left hand, which only comes from long use of a pen. She touches *The Weaver*:

"Read me that one."

Hainzell steps forward, bends and scoops up the dice in one rough movement. He meets her startled gaze.

"Empty the pouch—show me!"

The men playing dice are dockworkers, soldiers, a smith, a boy who has the look of an armorer's apprentice. While they mutter and stare, they as yet make no move.

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The rage that creeps into his voice is response to her stillness:

"Show me!"

She takes her pouch from her shoulder. It is large, thick, full; from it she draws sheets of paper. All are inked in large ill-set type. All are identical. He snatches one, reads it, sneers.

"Pamphlets! Heresy and revelation—is that why you've come here?"

And in disgust or anger he throws down the handful of dice, that rattle on the cobblestones, gleam in the spitting naphtha glare:

The Rose. Flight. Death. The Phoenix. The Weaver.

An indrawn breath, in that circle. There are thirty faces that can fall—too many for the fall of these same five to be coincidence.

It is, surprisingly, the apprentice who reads: fingers touching the Icarus-feather of *Flight*, not quite daring to touch *The Rose*:

"Knowledge through suffering; intrigue and death; the passing away of a great power."

Hainzell stares down at the dice, then turns and strides away; confusion and anger in him contending with something else.

Sanzia stands up, looking after him; takes a pace or two after him, and then pauses indecisively. The group of men remain squatting in a circle, the Tarot dice spilling onto the flat cobbles. The armorer's boy suddenly picks them up, seizes her hand in his cold fingers, and presses the bone-and-enamel dice into her left hand:

"Take them!"

She might have said much, but Hainzell is gone, the sound of his footsteps diminishing, so with only a nod (thanks, or merely acknowledgment?) she tightens her fist round the dice and hurries off after the man.

"Why?" This from an elderly dockworker.

"Oh, she might—need?" The boy hesitates. "She's a stranger, a foreigner, she might . . . things are bad in the city now."

The men rise and stand looking into the dark.

"We can't trust her," one of the older soldiers says.

The apprentice nods. "She can't betray what she doesn't know. She's not from here. She knows the Church of the White Rose, but not as we do. But it's the man of the Rose that I'm sorry for."

"Well, I am sorry for all of them," another dockworker says. He flicks a match from his fingers into the river, and the red spark arcs down. "Sorry for all of them who take no notice of us because they can't see us. Well, they will see us soon enough."

A fifth man (they are all men here, you will notice—or perhaps you will not notice—although some of them have wives, and some have children; the former not a necessity for the latter; and I don't know where the women are), says, "They don't matter to us at all."

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The armorer's apprentice says, "What about the Bridgebuilder? What about the Visconti?"

The group remains together for some few minutes, talking, but with the dice gone, some of the spirit is gone from them, and they soon disperse, each going separately back into the alleys that open onto the dock.

Hainzell is passing shells of buildings so tall that clouds can float in through the broken windows. And cellars where fungus grows tall as a man: inky caps and puffballs, stinkhorns, creeping veined mats of white fungus-flesh, slatted layers and shelves of it, spores like fine mist in the air.

He walks quickly to begin with. Then, aware of the inevitable, slows his steps, not quite willing to admit he is waiting for her to catch up. He has reached the river bridge before a footstep behind him makes him turn.

"You shouldn't run," Sanzia says.

"You shouldn't be here—!"

Sanzia wants to touch him, the way that the hair is rough just at the nape of his neck is too much for her. She puts the flat of her hand against the skin of his neck, soft, sweet-smelling, and he knocks her hand aside and turns to face her, his back to the parapet of the bridge.

Her voice, somewhere between resignation and anger:

"You are *not* my brother!"

As if it were the continuation of a long dialogue (and it is, over some years) Hainzell says, "I feel my blood in you sometimes. I've washed you, seen you naked, sung you to sleep, bandaged your cuts and scrapes, listened to the first words you could speak—"

"I am not your sister!"

"I raised you so." Hainzell, a little ironically, adds, "The White Rose would have you now, if that wasn't so. I knew of your arrival."

"I want you," Sanzia tells him. "I want no one else."

They stand on the bridge, unobserved, but for how long?

"Do you still wear that?" She touches the raised embroidery of the Rose. "I don't understand you. We began together. You came here to bring them down, not join them!"

When Hainzell speaks again, there is the trace of an accent that he lost years ago: her accent. "Go home. The Church will take you into the Levels. They would do it now if not for the death—" And then he hesitates.

"The Rose made a promise. People have forgotten, or fear to remember. There was a promise to lead us into the Heartland," Sanzia says, as if thinking of something quite other; and her hand reaches out to his, as if the desire moved it and not her; the same desire that makes the fingers tremble, and he steps back.

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Hainzell, touching the Rose again, thinks: Has it been the sweet rose for so long, and is it now to be the devourer? Instantly, as my flesh answers to hers when it should not: sister, sister . . .

He at last looks her in the face, that thin, malnourished face that is framed by coarse silver hair. "I have had to settle for the possible," he says, "and I won't help you, except in this one thing: if you leave the city tonight you will be able to leave, because of what is happening now, but if you stay until tomorrow you will not be able to leave. And that," he finishes, "I would tell to my sister but not to my lover, Sanzia."

She watches him leave, and still she carries the two words that have been together in his mouth: *Sanzia, lover.*

The snow falls on the great square, and on the stone mausoleum, and on the open coffin and the exposed face of the dead man where he lies in state.

Oddly, there is only one thought in the old woman's mind: *Now there is no one left to call me Luce. . . .*

You're cold, Visconti, Luce thinks. And has an impulse, surprisingly strong, to reach forward and wipe away the snow congealing on dead flesh. She suppresses the impulse with a too-easy facility.

She is alone and moving painfully, she who in her youth was a fighter, Luce; could run fast enough to throw Molotov cocktails into the cabins of tanks (not fast enough to escape the screaming) and now she moves achingly slow, arms bound in the metal grips of crutches. She has been tall and is now stooped, has been fat but is now worn down, like sea-polished wood, to sparse flesh on spare bone. They have slowed the cortege so she can follow it these last few steps to the mausoleum.

Hainzell, beside her, is troubled.

The yellow sky is flecked with falling blackness. Below the city's roof-line the snow turns white, softening cornices and cupolas, whitening the shoulders of men (and some women) who stand in drab coats, motionless, their heads for the most part bowed, as the loudspeakers play funeral marches and a requiem mass.

Luce looks down at the coffin, that seems too small to contain that body—too narrow a space for the Visconti, the Bridgebuilder, that they have called "a living force of history," and were well advised to call him (while he lived and heard).

The cortege stops. The music ceases. A kind of concerted movement goes through the crowd in the square, like wind across a cornfield. The white discs of their faces dip in and out of vision, as they turn and speak with each other.

Luce, brought a microphone on the mausoleum steps, and leaning heavily on her crutches, says:

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"Brethren and citizens, I speak with you in sorrow. The father of our Church has been taken from us, the Heartland has him, and we are left alone. We know how great a debt we owe to him, through those years of poverty. There is not a man among you who cannot say: life in the city would be different today had the Bridgebuilder not lived."

A sudden disturbance in the crowd resolves itself into an eddy of movement—protesting figures with banners and pamphlets: against squalor, want, disease, hardship. Luce signals to Hainzell and he to his men: voices are silenced with a quiet and brutal efficiency.

"The whole city will mourn our father Visconti's death," Luce concludes. Her gaze falls on the embalmed body as officers of the Church lift the coffin, to place it in the mausoleum, upon a glass panel of which are engraved the words of the philosopher-magicians of the White Rose: *Between the Heartland and the Edge is only the space of a breath.* Luce looks at that dead white face.

Now you bastard—now we're rid of you, and your stultifying grip on us; now there's only me, and maybe we can turn this Church into what we meant it to be, in the revolution—and I hope you can watch what I'm going to do!

To Hainzell, she says, "That's the old bastard buried at last."

Hainzell glances at his superior of the White Rose. "You wouldn't have dared to say that while he was living."

"There wouldn't have been the necessity." Luce is acidic, but his words shake her, in the way that truth does. She thinks: One day we may know why we were so afraid of Visconti—

Or is it: Why we loved him for doing what we couldn't and dared not?

Hainzell says, "Sanzia is in the city."

This shabby man, who knows (who better?) exactly what sedition and heresy pass under the eyes of the White Rose.

"What do you want to do about it?" Luce says. "If I send her away, she'll return. Shall I have her killed?"

"*No.*"

There is an expression on his face that she cannot identify, and that—after some fifty years' experience of the human race—worries her.

"She's dangerous."

Hainzell, with a cynical humor, says, "I think she won't give us time to reform. Seeing no further than the Visconti, and expecting us to he the same. And—"

"And who's to say we won't be?" Luce completes his thought for him, seeing his startled look. "I know. Believe that I know. I have lived fifty years doing what's possible. With these people and this city, the Heartland is a dream and a prayer and a vision, and nothing more. What action will she take?"

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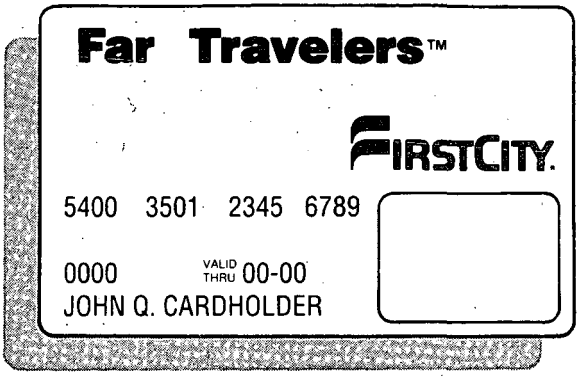
The Shape of Things to Come



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Because he is who he is and what he is, he says, "Do we *wait* for her to act?"

"No," Luce says at last. "When this flummery's done with and the bastard buried, find me a way to speak with this Sanzia of yours."

Hainzell, much too quickly (and even he can tell that), protests, "Not *my* Sanzia."

Later they will say, or she will claim, that Sanzia brought these instruments of heresy, but the truth is that they were in the city and in use long before she arrived. Gamblers' dice, children's toys—that use closer to their nature than the use she found for them.

"They are not unknown to the Church of the White Rose," says a man one night, a little later, when there are many of them gathered in the Tunnels below the city. The tunnel is an iron pipe a dozen yards in diameter. Rivets as big as a child's head weep rust, fanning down in orange-gold runnels. Icicles hang down, two yards long. Light from braziers glows orange on the walls.

Sanzia sits on her outspread jacket. Her head is bowed. The Tarot dice lay before her, unstable on the cloth, and she turns them almost absently in her fingers, laying die-faces upright:

Plague, whose tiny illustration is the knot with which, in this city, they tie the head of a corpse's shroud—

Twig and leaf of *The World-Tree,* a star caught in it; no room on it for the larger images of the Card, the Tree and what rests under its roots and branches—

The Triune Goddess, which is here depicted as a drop of blood upon a surface of stone—

The man interrupts her, indicating the last die-face, protesting, "That is an old heresy, the White Rose would burn you for bringing it here, what use is it to us?"

Sanzia continues to turn the dice so that in time they will have seen all. The dance of their succession: *Hermit, Lovers, Chariot, Weaver . . .*

As one grows old, one grows careless with the flesh; but still, she thinks, to be burned—!

. . . The Lightning-Struck Tower, The Fool, The Star, Justice . . .

"I bring you keys," she says, "and you ask me what use it is to go through an opened door."

It is the kind of saying that may well be recalled and requoted—to really fix it in people's minds she should die a martyr's death. And that comment wouldn't have occurred to me, she thinks, if I hadn't met and spoken with him again. Hainzell, brother and not-brother. What do I care about these belly-brained citizens?

There are two or three dozen gathered round her now, hugging close

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to the warmth of the brazier. They may be waiting for morning to come, and they may be working toward some realization of their own: who can say?

The same man says, "*Is* there a Heartland?"

Thinking of the Heartland, the light grows brighter, one dreams of older buildings, small and homely, and white courtyards under an everlasting noon.

A child no more than ten says, "There are houses there full of gold and diamonds, and food, and you can fly."

"Lovers," says an old man, "and children and those we have long forgotten who knew us once, they are waiting for us in the Heartland."

"No," says a third voice, lost in crowd and shadow, "for each of us there is one thing we can do best, one thing we must become. Heartland is where we find out what we are for."

The dice turn: *Wheel of Fortune, Phoenix, The Players, Fortitude . . .*

Sanzia says, "The White Rose tells you must do. These show you what you might do. The White Rose tells you what was in the past and what is in the future; these show you Now. I don't know if there's a Heartland or not, or if it's an inner or an outer place. These . . . are a guide but you don't know where they will take you, or when you have reached it, or if the journey continues. There is always a part of us that we don't know, and it speaks to us here."

They are only words, she thinks, and frail against the grey high walls of the Church of the Rose, and the Rose's servants, and the unreachable Bridgebuilder, who was called Visconti and is now named Luce. What use a handful of bright images that are only children's and gamblers' toys?

A young man as palely fanatical as she says, "There are ways. We can bring them down. There are ways, but put the dice away now and help us."

She has pamphlets of heresy and sedition and doubt, but it comes to her now, she has more trust (with these child-brained people) in the toys of children. If used properly . . . (Does she hear that she now says *must* instead of *might?*)

Sanzia says, "I know what we must do."

It begins now with rusted rails, between which the grass grows tall and brown. To pick a way across these is difficult, to cross them hindered with crutches almost impossible, and it is Hainzell who at the last, diffidently, offers to have her carried; and for his trouble gets what he expects, a vicious refusal.

The sun is a white disc behind mist. Pale blue and milky sky, and the shadows cast by the rails are fuzzy-edged. Luce pauses, wipes her fore-

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head that is running with salt sweat. The quilted black tabard is too hot, she wears it only because, sewn into the quilting, are hard thin plates of metal.

"Here?"

A rusty brazier stands by a broken wall that may once have been part of a shed. The skeleton of a steam engine hulks in the background. She is aware of movement as they approach, of how people slide away into distant dips and hollows of the ground, into distant buildings, as a school of fish disperse when water is disturbed. One person remains. A young woman—or is she older? The misty light is kind to her skin—with fire-white hair, who squats on her haunches by the brazier, throwing dice left hand against right.

Hainzell stops a short distance away, gun settled easily under his arm, enough protection here in the Yards. And Luce inches her way forward, weight on metal crutches, not on wasted muscle; until she can stand over the young woman who must be

"Sanzia."

The young woman ignores her, speaks to Hainzell:

"Brother. I'll call you brother, if it helps. Why are you here with her? Why have you brought so many of your own people?"

Luce looks around. There is no apparent sign of any guard, and that is as it should be: the White Rose are trained well. Luce doesn't speak, and this prompts Sanzia to ask "What do you want?"

Luce thinks of the Visconti, buried now, the snow freezing on that mausoleum; how many ages of death now he has to think of the years of power, how many long ages to grow sick of the taste of them.

"I can't do it differently," she says. "I must act with what I have, with people as they are and not as they ought to be."

There is a look in Sanzia's eyes, pale and brilliant and feral, the look of those who search for the Heartland—or the Edge.

Luce says, "I want you to help me be seated, child. And then I wish to see you throw and read the dice, as I hear so many now in my city see you throw and read dice."

The old woman is helped to sit on the warm earth, her metal crutches laid down beside her. Hainzell stands at her back. His eyes are not on her, they move from Sanzia to the Yards and back again: there is sweat clear on his upper lip.

The woman who is white-haired and may be young gathers up her handful of five dice, upon which are the faces of the Thirty Major Trumps: which can be thrown in sequence to ensure all faces have a chance of coming up in combination with all others—or which can, as now, be merely cast once:

Sanzia kneels down on the earth, facing the old woman. She is in

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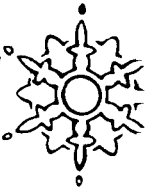

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shabby black, still, in trousers and shirt; and wears a necklace half-hidden by the cloth, that may be made out of yellow bone. The dice rattle in her hand. Her fingers are long, sallow, supple. Luce stares at the earth-stained fingers, at the dice that are clotted with dust. Then the casual flick:

The Weaver. The Rose. Death. The Phoenix. Flight.

And Luce, before Sanzia can act, reaches down and turns over a die: the image of enamel bright, as clearly limned as dreams of fire and silver, as images reflected in black water:

"These are the dice *I* will read for *you*—"

She has turned *The Players* instead of *The Phoenix:* an androgynous mask, half-comic and half-tragic, across which is laid a flute.

Luce says,"*Flight is* your presumption in coming here; you would aspire to my role—*The Players. The Rose* is your nemesis, and that's linked with *Death;* and *The Weaver,* that old spider, entoils you deeper and deeper, girl. . . . Now cast again."

Sanzia kneels for a minute, feeling the warm earth under the palms of her hands, and the sun on her head.

"Madam, you hold the city in your grip, but I will lead them to the Heartland. . . . the dice *I* cast were clear. *The Rose* is closest to you—"

Set into the die-face is a rosette of petals that are toothed cogwheels. Above the two women, Hainzell moves one hand to touch that yellow badge, the serrated petals.

"—you trust him and he will betray you; there are those who work righteously for your downfall, that's I; and the Church will fall and you be forced into flight—"

Hainzell interrupts "We're not puppets for these!" and in sudden anger flicks the Tarot dice with the toe of his boot and sends them spinning. None of the three of them can help bending forward to see what card-faces show now:

The Rose. The Phoenix. Flight. Death. The Weaver.

Luce's hand reaches out, quicker than Sanzia's, to grab the five dice and cast them a third time:

The Weaver. The Phoenix. Flight. Death. The Rose.

At this the old woman laughs, laughs and cannot be stopped for long minutes, until she coughs herself into silence. The sunlight falls silently on the old deserted sidings of the Yards.

"Now that I admire," Luce says. "That I *do* admire—loaded dice! What intelligence. Child, you do him credit."

Sanzia, prompted, must ask, "Who?"

"Your lover-brother who would like to see me excommunicated," Luce says. "But I am not so easily taken, not after so many years of working at the right hand of the Visconti. *Guards!*"

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Luce is still seated, cannot rise without help. She sees the White Rose emerge from nearby shelter, from distant buildings. Hainzell turns his head to gaze at them. And even as she wonders how he feels now, having been their commander for so long, to know they no longer move at his bidding; even as she commands "Arrest them," Luce feels for a moment as if she moves in a stylized puppet-masque of Judas-betrayals, almost knows what will come next:

Hainzell and Sanzia exchange glances of complicity.

"Arrest the Bridgebuilder," Hainzell gives a prearranged signal. "We cannot, any of us, take the chance of having a Visconti back; Madam, you were with him for too long."

But:

"And you've been with her for too long," says one of the guards. As it happens, this guard has a brother who works down on the docks. Among the crowd now are the armorer's apprentice, the armorer, the smith (you will notice there are still no wives nor unmarried women with them, or perhaps you will not notice), and all, citizen-brethren and White Rose both, wear ragged white cloth tied about their arms as a badge of identification: white that is the color of the Heartland:

"You are a priest-tyrant, and you her chief of police, and you a fanatic," says this anonymous guard (to whom, in the traditional manner of dealing with the proletariat in fiction, we will not award a name): "The city doesn't need any of you and is a dangerous place with you here—go!"

One moment of their unity: then Luce calls to her old supporters, Hainzell to the men he has commanded, Sanzia to the people who have heard her read the dice—

The dice, scattered in the uproar and fighting, after all their tumbling fall again to show *The Weaver, The Phoenix, The Rose, Flight,* and *Death.*

There is a great square in the city, and a mausoleum, and on its steps is set a heavy iron cage.

"Do what your predecessor would have done, execute me!" Sanzia insists. Her face is all eyes, brilliant with light. And then that fades. "Where is my brother?"

Luce says, "You love him."

Sanzia grips the bars of the cage. She looks out at the old woman. There is dirt ingrained into Sanzia's skin, and her hair hangs down in grey strings.

"If I could get him away from you—"

"That isn't what you came to the city to do."

"No," Sanzia says, "I came to do what you claimed once that you would do, lead the brethren into the Heartland. He came here with that in his

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heart, and you took him away from that, and you broke him; but if he was with me I'd heal him."

Luce says, "You're free. And I give you a choice. Stay here, use your dice, show these people the Heartland inside or outside of them; try and take them there. You won't do it. They're lazy, and they won't think or feel, and if their bellies are full they don't care about anything else. But I give you free leave to try."

Sanzia tries to stand but the cage is too small. All she can do is hunch over and grip the bars and keep herself in this simian-upright position. The snow beats across the square, and feathers the collar of Luce, and of those brethren still curious enough to gaze on this captive heretic.

"And the other choice?" Sanzia is insistent.

"I set your lover-brother free," Luce says. "He could have stayed here with me, the Church of the Rose is merciful. He could have stayed here with you. Instead, he has gone where he always longed to go, and from which journey the Visconti and I only delayed him. He has gone toward the Edge."

Luce, reaching for the great iron key, adds, "I have been called cruel, and perhaps I am. I don't give you the third choice—martyrs are a nuisance, and we not strong enough now to suffer one—the third chance: to stay here in the cage."

Sanzia, hearing the lock click and slide, says, "If you had given me that choice I would have taken it."

It is never a long journey, although the distance is far.

Down at the Edge, the Feral infest the sewers. Down at the Edge there are loners, toilers at solitary machines. This is how it is, where you can look out of filthy half-paned windows and, beyond spiderwebs and dirt, look down upon the stars. The deeps are filled with light. The cliffs go down forever.

This is how it is: the morning makes a gold glory of the windows dazzling from the depths. Frost snaps in the dawn. No birds fly on that high wind. Do not let yourself be tricked into thinking it an illusion: this is the Edge.

And time passes.

Sanzia learns as the light grows brighter to draw her strength from it, hardly needing to eat. There is a cold wind that all the time now blows into her face. When she speaks to herself, or calls ahead to him, the sound echoes off glittering ice curtains, in white vapor on frozen air.

Up on either side now rise walls, acres of blackening brickwork that diminish up to a thread of sky. The crepuscular light shows a metal-floored alley that she can span with outstretched hands. Frost gleams

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on the walls. A high, almost-inaudible thrumming rings in the ears. She touches her palm to the metal paving. It is faintly warm.

Ahead, the alley widens.

When fog sweeps in and douses the light she feels weakened, having so long taken nourishment from its radiance.

"You!" she calls, not loudly.

And for the first time is answered: "Leave me to go on."

"I need you," Sanzia says.

"No."

"I came to find you."

"No."

"*Yes*—"

He walks out of the mist, a man to all appearances human; the same Hainzell, with frayed-hemp hair and beard, in a worn, patched jacket and trousers; still (she is determined to think) the same Hainzell.

Perhaps it is the force of her will that snaps the world back into focus for him, the Edge drawn a way back off. Hainzell sees that she is shivering.

"Are you cold?"

"*No.*"

Now the mist has encircled them, cut them off from city and Heartland and Edge: a sea-fog, bone-chilling, that blurs the edges of reality.

Hainzell sits down beside her in the shelter of the wall. Her hair gleams, the lashes fringing her eyes are pale, and are those lines at the corners of her eyes crow's-feet? The thought of that is strange: Sanzia to show the signs of age . . .

He puts his arm round those thin shoulders, amazed at how clearly he can feel the bone. She is shivering. He reaches down to unfasten her jacket and—as she lies limp and unresisting—fumbles to put his arms round her body. Her skin is warm; her heart beats.

"No harm in it," he says.

"No harm?"

"I've done this often, when you were a child, when we were traveling and you were cold. It means nothing more."

Sanzia, bitterly, says, "And you call that 'no harm'?"

So close, the bones of her ribs distinguishable under his hands. He feels her own hand move to his, raise it, and put it to her breast—

"I am not a child!"

—As he pulls his hand away; there is a minute's undignified tumble, rolling on hard, gritty metal, and then she gets her hand to where she intended:

"Is *that* how you respond to a sister?"

Hainzell, now reaching to her, is astonished: She rolls away, hair

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tangling across her face; stands up and backs away, as he (with some physical difficulty) moves toward her.

"I thought you wanted—" He, almost laughing, almost crying: "Just when I began to think of you as a woman, not seeing you for years, you're different, not a child—"

Sanzia kneels down, a few yards away; her legs are shaking. One of her own rough-skinned hands moves to lie on her breast, feeling the erect nipple through the cloth, and then moves down to rest at the junction of her thighs, as if unconsciously protecting the ache that is there:

"I don't want—it would be like bribery; as if I tried to make you stay here—"

"Don't whine!" He is breathless with anger; anger at being made ridiculous, at being rejected, at having his—charity?—despised. And resentful, as a boy is resentful; and turns aside to arrange himself in his clothes, swearing in frustration. "And isn't this the same—I can't have you unless I stay, isn't that it?"

"No!" A whine of despair. And then Sanzia takes a breath, looking at him clearly and coldly for a time, while the sea-fog condenses and pearls in her hair. At last she sighs and her taut shoulders relax; she sits back, laying her hands flat on her thighs.

"It shouldn't be something for bargains or contracts," she says, "or staying or leaving. . . . You're not who *I* remember you to be, either. Does it matter? I want you, I want no other; that doesn't mean on no terms—"

Hainzell, more sulkily than seems possible for a man of his age, says, "I'm cold."

She grins at that. He, hearing himself, smiles reluctantly. Not long after that, they sit together again in the shelter of the wall.

Moved with no thought of the future, it is Sanzia who reaches across to take his hand, and clasp it in both of hers. She sits with her knees raised, resting her arms on them; resting her mouth against the skin of his hand, that is fine-textured and cool. Thinking *This moment, now, no future and no past, only now.*

He reaches across her with his free hand, fumbling in her pocket so that she (surprised) giggles; it is when she realizes that he is trying to get the Tarot dice that she snorts, breaks into giggles that would have been controllable had Hainzell not, in a voice of completely bewildered irritation, said, "What's the matter *now*?" and then she laughs so long and so violently that she breaks off in a fit of coughing; takes one look at his lined and puzzled face, tries to say something, and laughs again until she has to hug her ribs against the pain of it.

Hainzell, looking down at the dice in his hand (seeing *The World-Tree, Plague,* and *The Triune Goddess*), shakes his head. And then grins like a boy.

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"Sorry," he says.

"What did you—think you—"

Seeing her threaten laughter again, Hainzell says, "Some kind of guidance, a reading, a . . . I wanted something else to make up my mind for me. I've had too many years of making my own decisions. I'm tired."

Sanzia lets go of his hand and moves to embrace him: sisterly. And, her eyes fixed on his, reaches down to unfasten the buckle of his clothing where he is (still, or again) hard; trying to read in his face his reaction, his flesh warm in her palm, her muscles loosening with want.

He pulls her to him, reaching to her; there is a confused few minutes of cold hands and squeals and helpless laughter (he who has not laughed for so many years); a few minutes in which she can think of the ridiculousness of elbows and knees and one convulsive movement that is never passion but always a cramp in the hip-joint (laughter again) and then they are unshelled, hot flesh in the fog-ridden air, joined and co-joined and half-controlled—pulling clothes round them in a warm nest—and most uncontrolled: Tarot dice forgotten except as small and sharp obstructions under incestuous bodies.

She wakes alone.

Before dawn, she comes to the Edge, and waits while the Heartland's radiance makes the east grow bright.

Pale snow-light illuminates the city. The towers, gables, cupolas, battlements, arches, and spires are limned with white. Shadows fall toward her: cobalt-blue. She leans her bare arms on the roof-rail and feels the iron bite. Below her, myriad rows of windows set into the building's cliff-face burn orange-gold. A chill wind blows out of the east. Her bare feet are too numb now to feel the cold. She grins, sniffing back tears, and beats her blue-purple fingers together. They clap loud in the silence.

She leaves off looking at the city (all its filth and poverty hidden from this height) and crosses the snow on the flat roof, where other feet have trodden before her, while she slept. And comes to the rust-orange rail that is all the barrier now between herself and the Edge.

The sheer side of the building falls away at her feet, red bricks blackened with eons of neglect, windowless, obscure, spidered across with great vines and creepers.

Below the building—she must strain to see down so far—the brick ends and the solid rock begins. Rock as black as iron, faceted, terraced, creviced, split. Some ledges are grown over with what she at first takes to be moss, but then as her sight lengthens sees to be giant pines, firs, sequoias.

Down in the dark gold-dusted air, clouds gather and thicken.

Then a rift appears in the clouds far below her, and she sees down

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through it the fingernail-patches of green, the bright thread of a river that becomes spray and a last rainbow where it pours over the farthest Edge . . .

Down to the darkness where stars shine.

Just once, she thinks of following him; of letting her snow-tracks end here, as his do. She lifts her head. She sees the light behind the sky and hears the depths singing, tastes snow and fire in her mouth—and grips the rail tightly enough to dapple her hands with rust and blood.

Defeat is bitter in her mouth.

Time passes.

Traveling, she is aware at one point that her hands, stiff in the cold air, are liver-spotted, the skin pinched with age.

Sanzia returns from the Edge, alone, limping because the soles of her feet are blackened and swollen with cold-bite, the pain just on this side of what she can bear.

Midwinter lies on the city now, with more than a vengeance, with a black-ice hatred that matches her heart and mind:

I had him, I held him, his breath was warm and moist on my skin. I felt his heart beating in the circle of my arms that I could barely make enclose him, and now that warmth is gone forever, and this is selfish pain: *I don't care, I hurt!*

In her mind, the voice of Luce (long dead now) asks her "Where is the comfort that you had from the ordered patterns of the universe, that dance of symbols, that endlessly returning spiral: the thirty faces of the Arcana Dice?"

She walks across a great square. The paving-stones are vast, and between their irregular joints creep up small tendrils of black weed. Frost is stark on the stone. Somewhere there are voices, somewhere there are people doing whatever it is warm breathing people do in this black-ice stasis of the heart.

Sanzia walks across the paving-stones and the sky above her head is that color between milk-white and blue that comes with midwinter. She stops then, and quite deliberately kneels down on the frost-cracked stone. The melting ice touches the flesh of her shins, cold through cloth; darkens the hem of her jacket. It is not difficult then for her to feel through her pockets for the dice. She must hold all five of them cupped in both her hands or they will spill.

Sanzia's hands are brown, with snow-burns from the Edge; and on them blue veins stand up like worms and serpents. Dirt is grimed into the skin so deeply that now they will never be washed clean, and they

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are (are they?) an old woman's hands, though her face framed in that metallic hair still seems young.

She casts the dice, or lets them fall:

The Weaver. Flight. The Rose. Death. And—*The Triune Goddess.*

Sanzia turns her face up to the sky. It is noon, and the sun is a white disc, no more brilliant (or no less) than her hair. *The Sun* is also a card. And the dice are a weight in her hand, an irregular weight: *These are loaded dice, they cannot fall differently—*

Her breath is white in the air, the stone a bitter cold under her flesh. She casts again:

The Weaver. Death. The Phoenix. The Phoenix—again; and again *The Phoenix.*

Thirty die-faces, thirty Arcana cards, no way for double and triune images to fall.

Her eyes fill with water that is momentarily hot on her cheeks, and then as it runs becomes ice cold and burning. *The Rose* gone, gone with *Flight*: that Icarus-love of the Edge that is stronger than whatever they had between them, not-brother and not-sister.

And the stone is numbingly cold now, and the voices louder, approaching. In the middle of the square is a mausoleum, and steps, and on them stumps of rusted metal that might have been bars, a lock, a cage. There are no high walls of the White Rose's Church, the name of the Bridge-builder is forgotten.

She casts again those heavy cubes of bone that she, long ago, so carefully drilled and weighted with lead:

The Phoenix. The Weaver. The Phoenix. The Phoenix. The Phoenix.

And now that finely etched skull is gone, with the periwinkle-blue flowers inset into its empty eye sockets, as blue as the eyes of Luce in the long-ago. Sanzia is afraid to cast again, cast with loaded single-image dice that should not be able to fall against the grain of this world. Afraid that the spider-*Weaver* should go and all five dice show a white bird consumed in the fire of its own making.

She casts again, bent in concentration over the flagstones, idly brushing away fronds of black weed that the frost has killed . . .

And it is there that they find her.

There is a man wheeling a cart that steams with its load of hot food, small coins scattered in his tin; with him is a boy. After them comes a woman dressed in blue, and after her a woman who cradles a bundle of her work-clothes under her arm (you will notice that things have changed in the time that has passed, a change that has very little to do with Sanzia or Hainzell or Luce; though it has not changed as much as either the men or the women think. And if the time has come for that, perhaps the time has also come to award the crowd names):

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Foxfield, resting the cart on its supports for a moment, looks uncertainly at the woman who kneels (it is an unfamiliar posture these days). He turns to the small crowd that has gathered, hoping for some kind of support:

"Is she ill, do you think?"

The woman with work clothes, Gilfrin, says, "An old woman like her out in this cold, it's shameful!" at the same time as Foxfield's boy Veitch (who will grow up to have one of the finest minds in the city, but that is much later) exclaims "She's too young to be out, she's only a girl—"

After that they stand and watch her for a while, and the wind blows colder, and she sits, nameless, staring at five Tarot dice (but do they show what you expect to see?):

If the dice show *The Phoenix*, one of the citizens of this city, probably the other woman, Tallis, will take her home; take her into warm shelter in the iron tunnels, where braziers glow, where there is food, where she can sleep, where they can watch her to see what she will become—

If the image is *Death* they will remember who she is or was, and see in her face what was once seen on the face of Luce, and I think they will kill her—

If what shows is *The Weaver*, they will abandon her as a politic madwoman or mystic, and the bitterblack winter cold will kill her—

The dice cannot show *The Rose* or *Flight*, these two are not hers to have, they belong with whatever bloody death or light-born apotheosis he now owns—

But then, there are Thirty cards in the Major Arcana, and once loaded dice have gone wild and random, any of the symbols may fall in that scatter to the frost-bitten stone. As the eyes of these people see an old woman and a girl in the one face (who knows how differently they see each other? Allow them their different vision) so who can tell which may fall: *The Hanged Man* or *The Magus* or *The High Priestess* or *Last Judgment*, cards of sacrifice, of magic, of occult knowledge, and resolution; or perhaps, it may be, that dancing figure that is both Woman and Man, surrounded by symbols of beasts and apotheoses, the card *The World*.

Throw the dice and see.

Ask: you will be answered. Between destruction and transformation is only the space of a breath. I am only bone and inlaid enamel, I can only tell you what story you think I will tell—

And she, rising, looks at the faces that surround her; takes Veitch's hand, with a nod to Foxfield, and—as she begins to speak with Tallis and Gilfrin—they walk away, across the weed-studded square, leaving the dice where they have fallen. ●

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AFTERLIFE

I remember, before the computers,
you said I'd never know
how much you loved me.
Your purest secret.
You used to joke
that I'd die first
and, oh, how you'd mourn!
I laughed
because you were wrong.
You never knew
how afraid I was of nothing.
That I'd cling, even to pain.

When I buried you,
still blood and cold bone,
I kept something for myself.
You thought death was the end;
that was before the computers.
You knew what men and women do,
how easily we bind ourselves,
how slowly we unbind.
Computers grasp smaller things:
the nets that neurons weave
the hot kiss of the synapses
and the breeding of polymer minds.

They claim we are messages,
that our bodies bear
and can pass on.
You could have guessed.
If the self is data
and passion, elegant programming . . .
I'm sorry.
I didn't ask permission;
you wouldn't have said yes.
I'm dying now to join you.
Our love will trip the logic gates
for software keeps no secrets.

—James Patrick Kelly

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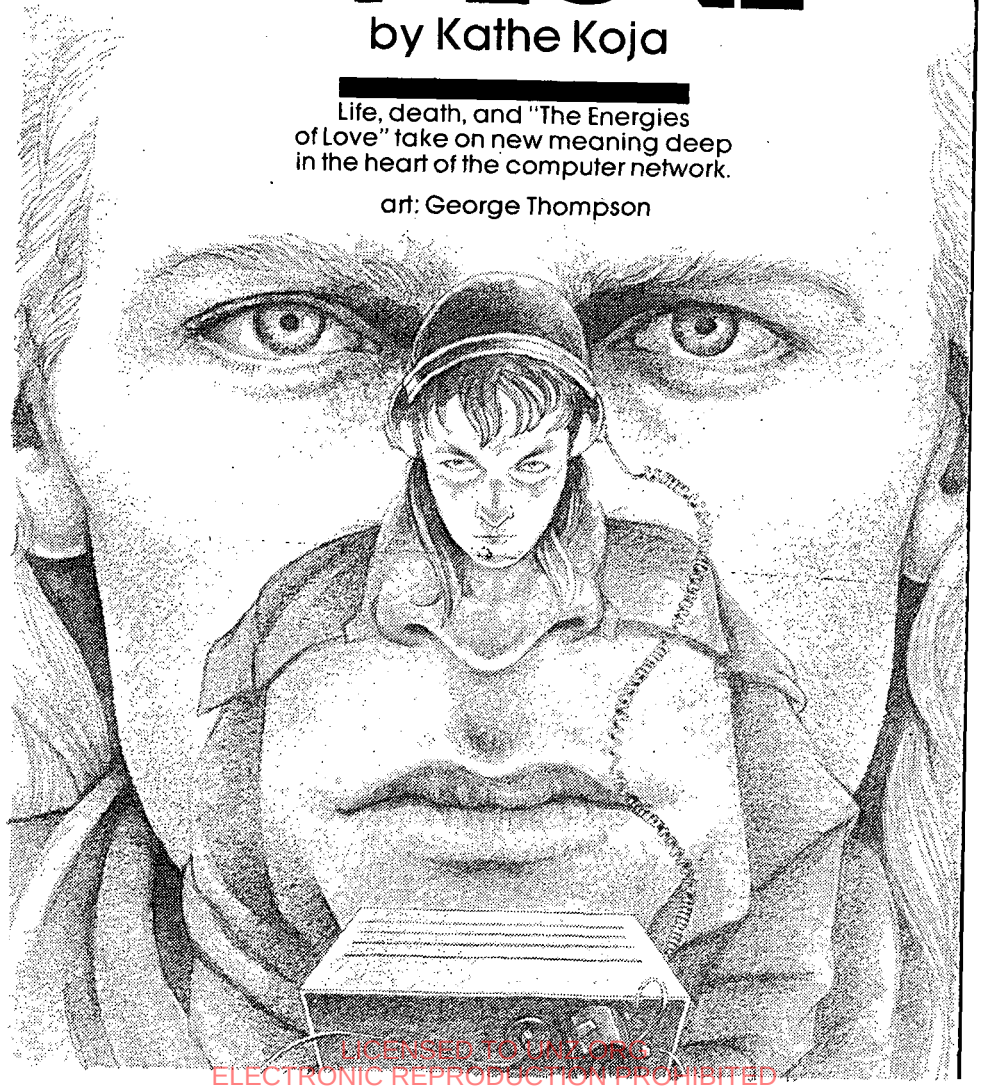
THE ENERGIES OF LOVE

by Kathe Koja

Life, death, and "The Energies of Love" take on new meaning deep in the heart of the computer network.

art: George Thompson



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The grey seat was cold as Bobby settled into it, ass formfitting to the uncomfortable plastic, the familiar public smell of the schoolbooth already all over him. He struggled with the headset, long dark hair tangling, as always, with the thin leads and bright circlet; he was the only one he knew who ever had trouble putting on a headset.

Around him, the schoolbooths of the Institute for Interactive Studies stood in ruler-straight rows, most of them in use: by students from the nearby university; by academics from the same; and by those who wanted merely to know more about the writers and artists, politicians and corporate toilers, whose lives and histories were contained on cold disk: a valley of the kings there for the calling up. There were four levels of access obtainable, at varying cost: tourist, skim, audit, and auto imprint level, or AIL; the deeper you went, the more you learned, the more you paid.

CARD PLEASE, the screen advised. Its green was bleeding at the edges, its color blurred. Bobby was a little blurred himself—it was early out, and his head still ached from last night's dustup—but he inserted his blue student-access card (which he hung onto for the discount; he had ceased to be a student three years before) and waited almost patiently for the schoolbooth to respond.

ACCESS LEVEL DESIRED?

AUDIT, Bobby thumbed in. He wanted AIL. But audit was all he could afford, today. It was all he could do to pay for his daily pack of dust. No matter. It was all going to pay off, and soon.

AUDIT, confirmed the schoolbooth. SUBJECT DESIRED?

"Desired is right," and he keyed in the magic words: CHRISTOFER LISTT.

He had only two hours' worth of audit access to play with, so he spent no time reviewing what he already knew, knew, knew: Christofer Listt, very late twentieth century poet, playwright, social satirist, novelist extreme; the golden touch, each work beloved by drooling public and tightassed critic alike. After a career quick and brilliant, the ultimate brilliance, the novel *The Energies of Love,* was left dramatically unfinished by the writer's abrupt fierce suicide at the much-mourned age of twenty-nine. "Boo hoo," said Bobby to the visual that always flashed up at this point in the narrative: boohoo to the blond hair and high cheekbones, to the surprisingly muscular body and he-man hairy chest and long-lidded secretive smile and all the rest as the access slid into the final interview, Bobby mouthing the words in unison with the dear departed: "I've always felt that, by permitting his or her public to come too close, the artist permits, and even covertly encourages, the very overfamiliarity from which contempt is proverbially bred." The charming smile; Bobby felt his own teeth glisten in response: the fucker was a

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natural, you had to give him that, just look at that interviewer crossing and recrossing his legs. "There's a very old saying," continued Christofer, and Bobby, "in the theatre, or is it politics?" short pause for interviewer's appreciative chuckle, and Bobby's knowing headshake—"the sense of which is, Always leave them wanting more." Two days after that particular interview, Christofer went to his favorite pub and, after drinking five straight pints of ice-cold Guinness, shot himself with a Smith & Wesson plasma rifle, modified for wide dispersion: tricky, but stylish. The empty men's room had not yet begun burning before the shrieking started. "Prefab wailing wall," Bobby sneered, but with grudging delight. No matter how many times you looked at it (and he had looked at it so many times that he was just about broke) the son of a bitch had had style to burn, ha ha but true, even to the last. Even to the leaving of the great masterpiece unfinished—especially that. *The Energies of Love* thus became an eternal morsel offered up to endless mastication, every critic free to finish the book in expanded column form.

"An absolute fucking masterstroke," Bobby told the screen, as it scrolled a bibliography, all of which Bobby had read many times before. Being a two-bit hack for a nowhere softporn soap left him lots of time for reading.

And now the best part, the only part that was worth it on audit; AIL was even better but this would do. Bobby sat up a little straighter, settled his back against the chair. "Hi shithead," he said, to the serene smile of Christofer Listt. "How're things in Deadsville?"

"Hello, Robert Bridgeman," in that smooth sweettalker's voice. "I'm glad you called me up.

"You're a fuckin' liar," Bobby said cheerfully, "but so am I, so what the hell:" The switchover from cold disk to skip, SCP, superconducting processor, was always worth the price of the trip: to be able to talk to even a facsimile of the late great Christofer Listt, to have him respond, even though in a limited fashion, to one's questions and remarks, was not only fun in a very strange way but extremely useful to the writer-in-waiting, the hack on the make. AIL left a bigger, deeper mark on the paying customer—some of it you never forgot—but for now this was okay. Better than okay, it was fine.

"What do you want to talk about, Robert?"

"Same as always, Christofer. You."

"What would you like to know?"

"*Energies*. How does it end?" The ritual question, to which he received as expected the ritual reply: "*Energies* is unfinished, Robert. I don't know how it ends."

"Save it for the tourists, asshole." Bobby stretched back as far as the

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leads would allow, scratched a little at his unshaven chin. "C'mon, Chris, me and you are old buddies. Spare a little shoptalk for a fellow pro."

"Are you a writer too, Robert?"

Bobby laughed. "You care, right? Listen, it's my money, I get to ask the questions. When you were at the part where Vincent is getting ready to rip Antonio, to suck him for all his credit, why did you have him go into that big reminiscence scene? It was out of character, man. You expect me to build something on *that?*"

"I'm not sure what you mean, Robert."

"You're really stupid when you want to be, you know that? Okay, how's this: *why* is Vincent so suddenly softhearted, why does he even consider how Antonio's childhood might make the rip even worse? And what's the bit about the blue Chinese dragon kite—and don't give me that Rosebud shit, you know I don't believe that. I know a fucking metaphor when I see one."

Two hours was, as always, shorter than it should have been, and in midsentence Christofer stopped, thanked "Robert" impersonally for his time and interest, and slipped away into the green-screen neverneverland, leaving Bobby with an incipient backache and big hunger unfulfilled: at this rate he would *never* finish *Energies* himself.

Robin, blond head bobbing over green tea and quickbread in his everlasting booth at the Smart Bar: technofetishist from the cells up, making more than a living by customizing the newest tech to make it even newer, old friend from schooldays whose shoes cost more than Bobby's weekly rent. "Hey, boy," Robin's long Alabama drawl, "pull up a chair. How's it goin', you and the deader?"

"Slow, man, very slow." Bobby ordered a Guatemalan coffee and a side of quickbread. "Fact is, I may be needing a little boost. How about it?"

Robin smiled. "You artists, man, you're all the same. Pure spirits, all that shit, and you're always lookin' for a way to cut corners. Had me a dancer last night, all she wanted to do was take me home so I could punch up her audition tapes."

"So did you go?"

"What, to her apartment? Can't happen. She's got great legs, but they ain't that great. You know what I get an hour, consulting?"

"Don't tell me." The quickbread's dex drilled and hummed through Bobby's head. "Listen, I really got a problem, Robin. What do you charge for just listening?"

"For you, bro, not a dime. Hey, baby, another long green one, 'kay?"

"What I want," Bobby said, stretching his too-long legs, feeling the scratch of inspiration frisking at his temples, "what I *want* is a way to

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get past the schoolbooth's security, get deeper than AIL. I have *got* to get a handle on Mr. Chris, Robin. Otherwise I'll never finish."

"Huh. Listen, why's this so all-important, bro? Can you tell me that? 'Cause you never have."

Bobby shrugged. There was a deeper answer, he thought (and it was a nasty thought), deeper than he knew, but it would come across as popshrink bullshit; the surface answer would do just as well, thank you. "Money," he said, rubbing thumb and forefinger together in slow voluptuous shorthand. "Do you know how much I could sell the final chapter of *The Energies of Love* for?"

"You know I don't read, man, why ask?"

"If I could write the last chapter, finish the novel, I could write my own ticket." And what a reach for a hack, Bobby thought, as dark laughter seared inside him, what a coup for a guy who jerks off his talent writing stroke-vid for the hornier-than-thous. "I could afford *you,* man, get it?"

Robin laughed. "Okay. Fair enough. You want to get past security, right?" He tapped the table edge, short dextrous fingers in slow tattoo. "You want you a bypass, then, something to fool the computer into thinkin' it's talkin' to one of its own memories. Bypass selective access, you know?"

"No," said Bobby, "I don't. That's why I come to you, asshole, right?" They both laughed, higher-pitched; the dex was kicking in hard. "So what's that mean, in layman's terms?"

"I just gave it to you in layman's terms. Do you know how the whole system works?"

"No, and I don't really want—"

"Sure you do. Listen up, bro." Leaning back, deep in the subject and bound to go deeper at a moment's notice, Robin expounded on the basics of skip, called it scientific seance and giggled in his tea, called "cold disk" just a freezer full of brain patterns, talked molecular-level electronics that enabled the brain to interface its own signals with external signals, so the thoughts of the greats can be stored directly for later retrieval and study, man, it's really pretty basic when you chop it down to bare bones. "'Nother tea here, please, and a beer for my friend, he's gettin' the shakes."

"Thanks," Bobby said as the beer arrived. Polski, his favorite. "So can you do it?"

Robin grinned, white teeth against pale lips. "Sure I can do it. I just never tried, is all." He laughed at Bobby's expression, all doubt. "Only problem is, if the computer thinks you're part of it—which is what we want—but if it thinks you're just another part of it, it could—and I say *could,* bro, mind you—it could wipe you."

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"What do you mean, wipe me? You mean, like bad data?"

"Highly doubtful. But a possibility. Also it could make you crazy, put in information that doesn't belong in your head." Robin laughed outright. "You should see your face."

Bobby dredged up a laugh. Do you want it that bad? he asked himself. Do you want to write that last chapter? All of it's easy but getting in; you can write it, you *know* you can, you can present it to the whole world that wouldn't read your own stuff if you paid them, and make them like it, love it, fawn all over it as if it came straight from the great man himself, the dumb bastard. You can have the future he burned, you can be the expert instead of a nobody hack; you can be Christofer Listt if you want to, you can be *better* than Christofer Listt. "So what if it costs me my brain?" he said. "I wasn't using it anyway."

"*That's* the spirit," and Robin gestured to the waitress. "Another side of bread, honey, and another beer for my friend."

It was simple, really. Once Robin was interested, and he was, it took no time at all to jimmy up a prototype, a circle of vein-blue wiring with a set of leads much like the regular set-up; Bobby was able to use it, at least off Robin's bench mode, with no more than the usual trouble. "And this'll get me all the way past security, past AIL and everything? This'll do it?"

"This'll put you where the guy lives," Robin said, fingering the leads. "Or doesn't, as the case may be."

"Uh-huh. Gimme the odds again on the computer frying me, will you?"

"Nope. It'll only make you nervous." Robin stroked the leads, smiling like dreamy big daddy. "Do you know how much a thing like this is worth on the street? Do you know how much, say, this year's crop of med school rivetheads would pay me for something like this, for the tech to interface directly, one-on-one, with Steiner and de Pauw? A cure for the common cold, man. How much is that worth?" Biofluorescence pealing down like summer light on his face, blond hair shining, he looked to Bobby like a technoid angel, bringing the good news. "Sometimes I surprise myself, you know?"

"So." Deep breath. This was the moment he had been dreading, the minute he found out just how deep he was swimming. Whatever it was, he couldn't afford it, couldn't afford not to have it. "So, Robin. How—"

"If you're going to ask how I did it, don't; you wouldn't understand." Robin's smile dimmed. "And if you're going to ask how much, don't do that either. All I ask is that you don't sell it to anybody else when you're done using it." He laughed, all at once, very loud. "That job I'll do for myself. And I won't even mention your name. How's that for friendship, boy?"

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Unexpectedly, stupidly, a wash of—moisture, ran in Bobby's eyes. Lack of sleep, right. "Can't beat it." He found himself laughing. "And if I die, or go batshit, *I* won't mention *your* name, right?"

"You got it. Just lemme know when you crack ol' Christofer's back door, okay?" Robin's smile softened, he patted Bobby's back. "And take it easy, the first ride you take. Test the waters, you know what I'm sayin'?"

"Sure."

"And get some sleep before you do, eat a meal or something. You look like shit, you know that?"

"Sure do." And Bobby realized just what he had in his hands, and he laughed so hard he had to stop.

He slept, he ate, he slept again, and woke to dress in sober grey sharkskin and black cotton shirt, wanting to appear somehow respectable, above suspicion. He got all the way to his door before realizing how stupid he looked; it took two minutes to change back to daily wear, the only difference an oversize cap, hiding the new headset; Robin had sworn it would pass door security without peep one. "Nothin' there to set it off," he'd assured Bobby. "You worry too much, man."

Robin was right. Still Bobby's hands were shaking, quick low-Richter tremors riding the nerves until he could have screamed: a teakettle bubbling with seismic gas. He took his usual booth, inserted his card, knowing there was credit enough to ride deep, as far as Mr. Computer was concerned. As far as Mr. Listt was concerned, who knew?

ACCESS LEVEL DESIRED?

AUTO IMPRINT LEVEL. Working so far.

AUTO IMPRINT. SUBJECT?

CHRISTOFER LISTT< 917/68. Here comes the burn, if it's going to, he thought, and could smell the sweat beneath his arms, sour as stale beer. Good thing, he thought, somewhere cold and lucid deep down, good thing no one's watching me; I bet I look like a fucking criminal.

CHRISTOFER LISTT< 917/68—and then a string of symbols, glyphs unknown, cool alphanumerics whose import he could not begin to guess, and a feeling of numbness, of wavering, like swimming in filthy water, and a pain in his head like a dustup hangover, and then, like coming to surface and he would never, never forget it, a voice, speaking: "What the *hell* is going on?"

He thought it was his own voice, and almost laughed: You made it, asshole! and said it, he thought later, aloud, segue to the shock of the answer:

"Then am I dead for good this time?"

The voice was just as it was in the interview, tone and pitch all the

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same, but the public persona was long, long gone, erased down to this nub of sickness, bright as a sore to even the casual eye, so bright that at first sight Bobby could not believe he had never seen it before. Silence, in which his shock nurtured itself, and the echoes of that voice told him thousands of things, extended vistas of nuance. Silence broken all at once by a cool, cool sigh, more weary than Bobby would ever be, and that voice again: "*Now* what?"

"My name's Bobby," Bobby blurted, before he could help himself, and heard the cold silver of Christofer's true laughter: not the false warmth of an icon's mirth but the slick iced humor of a man to whom nothing is funny anymore.

"How much did you have to pay, Bobby, to crawl up my ass in this undignified fashion? Is this some new sort of special service?"

Beneath the words there was surprise: Bobby could taste it. The fact of the question made him wary; the voice was unmistakable, there could be no simulation like this, but who knew what security riders there might be, listening in? Robin had gotten him in, but no one had ever opened this particular door, so who knew how to defend against what might be waiting on the other side? "None of your business," Bobby said, tough as he could make it. "What do you care, anyway?"

"It's not a question of caring, just a departure from my usual mode, which is very much like that of a quadriplegic in a desert. Very arid."

"If it's so bad there, then why'd you put yourself on disk?"

"A drunken unfulfilled lust," smooth and snotty, "for the absolute zero of death."

The phrase stirred Bobby—the bastard was still so good. "But you're not really dead, are you? I mean, I know you didn't leave any clone cells—"

"I was hoping to leave nothing at all, but I ballsed up, young Bobby."

Nothing but silence then, all around, as if, swimming, he had dived too deep into some unwarned-of trench where sound could never go. Then Christofer: "You diddled their security, then? Without being harmed by those watchdogs prowling loose?"

"I didn't know—I mean I figured there was some kind of override program, but I guess I beat it." Knowing that he had overcome unknown dangers made him happier still to be there, especially since the risks were already past.

"Why are you here?"

"I wanted—I want—" Come on, asshole, ask him! "I want to know about *Energies*. I want to know how it ends."

A loose witchy howl of laughter: "Oh for God's sake! A fan!" Christofer laughed so long it was scary, then stopped as if struck. "Tell the truth, you little shit."

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All right, you crazy dead son of a bitch. "I told you. I want to know how it ends. And I want to write the ending myself."

"Why in hell," and a door opened in Christofer's voice, vast and cold and bleak beyond bleakness, "would you bother?"

The truth boiled up, immediate, bitter: "Because I'm a fuckin' *hack,* that's why, you smug piece of shit! Because I have to be *you* to get anyone to listen to me!" In the faraway confines of the schoolbooth, his body shook, the quaking of rage. "Okay? Satisfied?"

Christofer spoke, a bitterness so corrosive that Bobby's anger flattened and died. "I'm the king of the hacks, Bobby, and the best joke of all is that no one ever knew. But me. And I could never forget. Because nothing I ever wrote meant anything at all."

"It meant something to me."

The waiting silence of consideration, and Bobby had the impression of scales balancing, offers accepted: the bargain achieved. "Then I'll give you your ending, Bobby. And you'll get me out of here, once and for all."

"Get you out? You mean like a zombie body? I can't afford to even—"

"I killed a better body than even my estate could buy. Listen to me: you found a way to get yourself in here, didn't you? Then get me out. I don't care how, but *I want to be dead.* And I want you to do it."

"Hey, I don't even know how it is you're alive in there. All I wanted to do was just get—"

"Either make your deal with the devil," and the coldness was back, blown ice, "or get out."

Kill him? Take the knowledge of the greatest premodernist and then willfully murder him? "What the hell," Bobby said, feeling the fabric of his mind stretch in what might have been a smile, "it's a deal."

"You want to do what?"

The pale light of the morning Smart Bar made Bobby look like a mad scientist. "Robin, man, just listen."

"I am listening." He shook his yellow head over steaming tea, believing at once all and nothing. "Look, I have no idea how the guy came to be inside there, but I'll do what I can. Whatever that is."

Bobby expected *Energies* to flow forth that day, and hit the schoolbooth with proportionate speed, but Christofer refused, and laughed when Bobby cursed. "I've had one O. Henry ending to my life," he said, "and I don't want another."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

It was like someone who had just mastered the art of holding a pencil watching a virtuoso demonstration of blindfolded calligraphy: the description of Christofer's first awakening, his awesome panic when he found he was not in the sleep he had sought but trapped instead in

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perpetual consciousness, made Bobby's flesh prickle and stir: what horror, waking to such a paradox, what sick rage to know you had done it to yourself.

Christofer had no idea of how the recording process had differed from the ordinary, or even if it had. "For all I know, this place is crawling with souls as damned as I am. Perhaps you could have a second career, as the angel of death."

"Hey, I got enough trouble just trying to figure out a way, I mean figure out how I'm, you know."

"How you're going to kill me. Don't be so squeamish—don't you want to know how *Energies* comes out?"

Bobby shrugged, small mental frown. "Sure. Can't wait." Nothing really wrong, is there, with killing someone who wants to die.

There was no point in going to the Institute the next day, or the next. He was having trouble sleeping, did some dust to perk him up; it didn't. At week's end Robin called him: "I have a kind of idea," not noticing Bobby's complete lack of excitement over such grand news. "Dunno if it'll work for sure, but we'll try. Hey, Bobby, you listening?"

"I hear you."

"Well, don't fall all over me, man, you know I hate that . . . Anyway, you c'n tell your chilly buddy to start giving you the poop on your book now."

"Great. Thanks. I'll tell him."

He walked out, into the oily dark, passing the Institute without looking, feet scuffing the scum of rainy leaves smeared like roadkill across the cracked sidewalks, walked till he came to a place where the dustheads liked to party. The dust leaned in like a hurricane, scouring him dry, sending him home to peer in the bathroom mirror, feet deep in the mulch of dirty towels, hands cold on the colder metal of the sink, staring into red eyes. "Fucking bastard," he said, in a matter of fact way, addressing—who? and slammed both hands to the mirror, driving glass into skin.

The Institute in the morning, duty breathing down his neck. Christofer: "Problem?"

"No problem."

"You're a very bad liar, Bobby." Christofer let the silence pool, then said, "Have you talked to your friend?"

"No."

"Stop it."

"All right, all right! I talked to him yesterday."

"Good news?"

"If you wanna call—yes, good news," with Christofer's own emphasis, coming down hard. "He thinks he found a way."

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Christofer's laugh, but so jaunty and rich that Bobby felt like hitting him. No one should be that happy about croaking, even if he is already dead.

And then Bobby was suddenly happy. "What if the Institute finds out it was me who, you know, erased you? They'll prosecute me. They might even put me in jail." He was grinning. "I can't risk that."

"What you can't risk is the dark side of my sunny good nature, jumping out to slit your fucking *throat!* Don't play this kind of game with me, Bobby. We made an agreement and you're going to live up to it. Besides," the sizzle of his voice cooling, "if your friend was clever enough to get you in here he's more than clever enough to get me out without leaving a trace. *If* they even know I'm in here in the first place, I as in me, my consciousness. As far as the Institute's concerned, nothing will change; they'll still have their damned disk, and if they don't so what? What do I care? What do you care? You'll have *Energies*, you'll be either my greatest biographer, the world's expert on me (and you are, you know, if you think about it), or the man, the *writer*, who could do what even the great Christofer Listt could not: finish *The Energies of Love!* Who's going to challenge the man who did the impossible? The Institute? They can't keep you out of here even now—what do you imagine they'll be able to do to you then? Really, Bobby," the residue of anger gone, dissipated by logic, "you are slow sometimes."

"So I'm slow. So sue me. So have your *estate* sue me. I could walk out of here now, you know. Just walk right out . . ." He was shivering, he could feel his elbows bumping against the faraway chair, he was freezing. Damn Christofer for being so right: there wasn't, really, anything the Institute could do, even if they did find out. Which was a poor possibility. Which Bobby knew, had known. What a stupid argument he'd used. He'd think up a better one tomorrow.

"Bobby."

"What."

"Can you imagine what a favor you're doing me?" His voice was gentler than Bobby could have imagined; it hurt to hear him. "Haven't I told you all this before? Or do we need the whole dreary story again?" Bobby said nothing. "And think of *Energies—*"

"Fuck *Energies!* Fuck your stupid masterpiece, and fuck me too for ever wanting to write it, for ever even *reading* it. I was better off as a dusthead hack."

"No one here believes that."

"I don't *want* to kill you, asshole! Can't you get that through your head? I'm sorry I ever agreed to this deal, I'm sorry I ever walked in here."

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Long silence. Finally Christofer said, "I won't release you from your promise. But I will tell you a secret."

"I don't wanna hear it."

"No? It's a good one. Here it is." And he paused, a little pause to make sure Bobby was really listening. "Here it is," he said again. "I had no idea how *Energies* ends. Until today."

Bobby at first could not react, but when he did, the scream he wanted most could not be found: the best he could do was a throaty croak, rage and damnation, a sound very much like that made by Christofer on the first day of his cold disk confinement. "Oh great, that's just fucking *great,*" he said, when words were possible. "That's just what I wanted to hear. No, go on, go ahead, tell me how it ends. I'm all ears. I can't stop you anyway, can I?"

"No, you can't." Christofer paused again, a different kind of pause. Then: "You remember the last scene, don't you, where Vincent is just about to destroy Antonio, but stops to consider the dragon kite, and Antonio's childhood?"

"Yeah." A sodden, angry breath. "Yeah, so what."

"So. You said, once, that it was out of character for Vincent to become so soft-hearted, and you were right, as far as it went then. But now we know why Vincent's so soft. And you're wrong, Bobby, I know what you're going to say and you're wrong. Do you remember what Vincent got, in exchange for the blue dragon kite? Do you? Tell me."

"The—I don't know, what, the damn Lucie Lacey holocard. What does—"

"The holocard was old, wasn't it? At least a few seasons, maybe more. And its corners were bent and its surface was getting dirty and it'd been in Antonio's closet for who knows how long. But. Who did Vincent like best of all the holo stars?"

"Lucie Lacey." It was starting. He could feel it. He knew.

"And how many kites did Vincent have?"

"I don't know. You never said." Bobby felt the smile coming, because it hurt like hell but he couldn't help knowing, guessing the end, guessing the why, and he sat tight and let Christofer tell it, hurting and smiling. "How many?"

"Hundreds. Or fifties, or tens. *Many,* that's the point. And how many Lucie Lacey holocards did he have?"

"All of 'em."

"All but one."

"And since Antonio'd lived all his life in the Downs—no, shit, I'm sorry, you tell it."

"No." Christofer was smiling too. "No, *you* tell it. It's your story, isn't it?"

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"It's—just let me finish, okay, just be quiet for a minute . . . okay, Antonio had this rotten childhood in the Downs, he saw the sun once a year, he never came topside—the kite was *it,* even the idea of the kite, *any* kite . . . and Vincent got the card, the only one he didn't have—"

"It looked like Antonio got the better of the deal, didn't it?" Silence. "Didn't it, Bobby? But Vincent got the thing he wanted most, at no cost to himself." More silence. "Only Antonio still had that old card. Only Antonio."

"Oh, *shit.*" Across the new silence, the knowing quiet, it seemed as if they touched, or would have, if they had had hands to meet. Christofer's clasp was somehow cool, Bobby's dampish, warm with sweat. They held for a time, neither saw how long, then released. "Well." Bobby laughed a little. "Leave it to the old master, huh?"

"Just call me Vincent, Antonio." Quiet between them. Then: "When will it happen?" An edge to his voice that Bobby knew: a glad impatience, a coal in the chest, glowing. "Soon?"

"That's a stupid question, isn't it, Christofer."

"Everyone's entitled to one, I think."

"Sure they are. You can have mine."

Someday after we have mastered the air, the winds, the tides and gravity, we will harness for God the energies of love. And then for the second time in the history of the world man will have discovered fire.

—Pierre Teilhard de Chardin ●

The difference between fantasy
and science fiction
is that one has
honest politicians
scrupulous lawyers,
and altruistic doctors,
while the other
only has beings from outer space.

—William John Watkins

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Once again, Nancy Kress deftly reveals the sharp edges of human nature . . .

RENAISSANCE

by Nancy Kress

art: Hank Jankus

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Her ladyship was late to breakfast again, and when she did appear it was in a cobwebby lace robe stained with Bloody Marys, blonde mane hanging in artful mats, eyes big and shadowed with Gray-Violet No. 6. So we were doing Camille this morning. Brad, already through his melon and severe in pinstripes, glanced up and frowned. The tiniest possible frown, almost imperceptible: you don't upset a wife eight months pregnant with God-knows-what, *no matter what*. But the frown said he was not prepared to play Armand. Not dressed for the part, my dear. Did her ladyship care? She did not.

"Mother Celia, such a dream I had!" she breathed. I detest being called "Mother Celia." Cherlyn knows this.

"What did you dream, darling?" Brad asked fondly. His tie was wrong for his suit: too flashy, too slick. Unlike his father, Brad had no style. Was there a gene for tackiness? And if so, had they edited it out of the monstrous bulge under Cherlyn's Bloody Marys?

Cherlyn breathed, "I was walking up these stone steps, right? White marble steps, like at a state capitol or something? Only it was in a foreign country, like in a Club Med ad, and I'm the only one there. The sun is beating down. It's very hot and the sky is very blue and the steps are very white and the place is very quiet and I'm very all by myself."

Not a dialogue writer, our Cherlyn. In the old days, Waldman would have had her off the set for that sing-song voice and sticky-cheery expression, as if just below the smooth flawless skin lay smooth flawless marzipan. But Brad only leaned forward, elbows on the table and face wrinkled in concern—my son does this very well—to prompt, "Were you afraid, darling?"

"Not yet. That's the weird thing. On either side of the steps were these two humongous stone things, really strange, and even when the first one spoke to me I wasn't scared. They were half lion and half some kind of bird."

"Griffins," I said, despite myself. "Fierce predators who guard treasure and eat humans." Both looked at me blankly. I added—also despite myself—"Paramount once did the movie. You must have seen it, Cherlyn, you pride yourself on your knowledge of your profession's history. B-movie. Nineteen, uh, thirty-seven. *The Griffin That Ate Atlanta*."

"Oh, yes," Cherlyn said vaguely. "Wasn't that Selznick?"

"Waldman," I said. Brad shot me a warning look.

"I remember now," Cherlyn said. "I remember thinking there was a part in there I would have been *great* for."

"I'm sure," I said. In her present condition, she could play Atlanta.

"*Anyways*," Cherlyn said, "in my dream this griffim spoke to me. Actually, they both did. The one on the left—no, wait, it was the one on the

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right—the one on the right said, 'Soon.' Right out loud, real as life. Then the one on the left said, 'We shall return.' "

"Old griffins don't die, they just fade away," I said.

"Huh?"

Brad frowned at me. I said, "Nothing."

"Well, *anyways*, that did sort of give me the spooks, right? This weird stone griffim looks me right in the eye and says, 'We shall return.' No, wait—it was 'We can return.' No, no, wait—it was '*Now* we can return.' That was it."

In the midst of the dialogue editing, the phone rang. The quality of mercy, and it wasn't even raining. I reached backwards from my chair to answer it, but Brad leapt up, knocked over his coffee, and made an end run around the table to get there first. Excilda appeared with a sponge, clucking. Brad listened and handed the receiver to me without meeting my eyes.

"Expecting a call, are we?" I said. Excilda disappeared, still clucking. Brad's eyes met Cherlyn's, then slid sideways to the table in nonchalance as phony as his tie. I felt a brief cold prickling at the back of my neck.

"Celia?" the phone said. "You there, darling?"

It was Geraldine Michaelson, nee Gerald Michaelson, my lawyer and oldest friend. She had on her attorney voice, which was preferable to his all-us-girls-together voice, and I prepared to listen to whatever she had to say. But she was merely confirming our monthly lunch date.

"There's one or two things we might discuss, Celia."

"All right," I said, watching Brad. His blue eyes did not meet mine. Handsome, handsome man—his father had been gorgeous, the dear dead bastard.

"Some . . . irregularities," Gerry said.

"All right," I said. There are always irregularities. The biggest irregularity in the world kicked under my daughter-in-law's negligee.

"Fine," Gerry said. "See you then."

I passed the phone to Cherlyn, who instead of hanging it up as anyone else would, sat holding it like a party drink. "And *then* in my dream, the stone griffim sort of shook itself on the steps—"

"You told someone," I said to Brad. He turned on his dazzling grin. I was not dazzled; I knew him when. "Cut the bullshit. You broke your word and leaked it. And that phone call was supposed to be the story breaking. Who did you give it to?"

"—even though it was *stone*," Cherlyn said loudly. "And then—"

"Who, Brad?"

"Really, Mother, you worry too much. You always have." More grin: his repertoire is limited. If he were an actor instead of a broker, he'd be as execrable as Cherlyn. He took the phone from her limp hands and

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hung it up. "You shouldn't have to worry now, at your time of life. You raised your family and now you should just relax and enjoy life and let us worry about this baby."

"*Who*, Brad?"

"—the griffim stood right up—are you listening, Mother Celia?—stood *right up*—"

"You could have waited. You promised the doctors and researchers. You signed a contract. There would have been plenty of money later, without selling a tawdry scoop."

"Now just wait a minute—"

"—on the stone steps big as life and said again 'Soon,' and I liked to died because—"

"You never did have any style. Never."

"Don't you—"

Cherlyn half-rose in her chair and shouted, "—like to died because those stone lion-things just shook out this huge set of stone-cold wings!"

We turned our heads slowly to look at her. Cherlyn's pretty vapid eyes opened wide enough to float L.A.

The phone rang.

Reporters. TV cameras. Cherlyn in a blue maternity smock, blue bows in her hair, no more Camille. Auditioning for the Madonna. Brad in his flashy tie, good suit, coffee-stained cuff, reveling with a sober face. Sleaze and charm. My son.

Miss Lincoln's pregnancy has been completely normal. No, we are not apprehensive about the baby's health. All fetal monitoring shows normal development.

Got two dice?

My wife and I regard it as a singular honor to be chosen to bear the first child with this particular genetic adaptation, the first in a breath-taking breakthrough that will let mankind finally realize all its century-long aspirations.

Got two hundred dice?

Ten years ago, it was barely possible to genetically select for hair color. Ten years from now, the human race will be poised at the start of a renaissance that will dwarf anything which has gone before. And our little Angela Dawn will be among the first.

I had not heard the name before. From the window, I could imagine Brad and Cherlyn scanning the crowd of reporters before them on the lawn, looking beyond for the next wave: agents, book publishers, studio people. How much did a story like this go for these days? Yahweh and Technicolor Mary.

My wife and I talked this over at great length, and agreed it was mo-

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mentous enough to interrupt her film career for a brief time in order to participate in this, uh, momentous research. We both felt it's what my father, the late Dr. Richard Felder, would have wanted.

He wasn't missing a trick. But Richard, whatever else he was, was not stupid. Physicists seldom are. Richard would not have stood there in the wrong tie speaking over-confident platitudes. Richard could have told Brad something about the unseen risks, the unseen connections, in universes more complex than Universal Pictures.

This opportunity represents the greatest treasure any parents could give their child. But Miss Lincoln and I do regret that the story has broken prematurely. I have asked Dr. Murray at the Institute to investigate how this could have happened. However, since it has happened, it seems better to answer your questions honestly than to permit possibly irresponsible speculation.

I didn't stay to hear any more. While the reporters were still enthralled, I ducked out the back door, struggled over the orchard wall, and called a cab from the Andersons' housekeeper's room. Juana eyed my torn skirt with bemusement, shrugged, and went back to polishing silver. She once, in a burst of confidence after seeing Cherlyn's sole film, told Bruce Anderson that Cherlyn looked like "Alicia in Wonderland, only Alicia, in that book, she keep on her clothes," a remark which endeared Juana to me for life. The Mad Tea Party. The Queen of Hearts. Off with her head. In Cherlyn's case, redundancy.

I suddenly remembered that it was a griffin who conducted Alice to the trial of the Jack of Hearts.

It must have been that thought which gave me Cherlyn's dream. Eyes closed in the cab on the way to Gerry's office, I walked up the shallow marble steps to the temple. The griffins, *en regardant*, watched me from wild carved eyes, but did not speak. I crept towards the one on the left. The great predatory stone head swung towards me, so that I was forced to step back to avoid the hooked beak. Manes of spiral curls, writhing as if alive, stretched towards me. The lion's tail swished from side to side. Stone talons gripped tighter on unhewn rock. But the beast remained silent.

I said, "Are you returning?" Dreams permit one inanity.

The griffin remained silent. But then the eyes suddenly changed. They turned black, a black deeper than any night, more ancient than the marble underneath my feet. The griffin rose and shook its wings: pointed, deeply-veined, stone flesh over muscled bone.

But to me it said nothing.

"Celia!" Gerry cried, coming towards me with both hands extended and both eyes averted. That was bad; Gerry considered eye contact very

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important. In the days when he was an agent and I was Waldman's chief scripter, he would make eye contact on the L.A. Freeway at seventy.

"What is it," I said.

"You're looking wonderful."

"What is it?"

Gerry rubbed her jaw. Under the make-up, she needed a shave. "Your portfolio."

I found that somewhere inside, I'd known. "How bad?"

"Pretty bad. Come inside."

She closed the office door. I sat by the window. Brad had had my portfolio for a little over a year. *To get the business started, Mother.* Desperate dignity in his unemployed voice. A gesture of maternal faith.

"He's been stock churning," Gerry said. "Turned over the entire damn portfolio twenty times in the last ten months. And chose badly. There's almost nothing left."

"How do you know? I gave him complete power of attorney. He wouldn't tell you."

"No."

"How do you *know?*"

"Don't ask. I know."

"You never trusted him." She didn't answer me. I said, "The real estate?"

"I don't know yet. Being looked into now. I only found out about the other this morning."

"When will you know?"

"Possibly tonight. I'll call you if . . . the portfolio was a *lot* of money, Celia. What'd he need it for?"

"Had your TV on this morning?"

She hadn't. We both stared out the window. Black dots whirled in the blue distance. They might have been sea gulls. Finally Gerry said, "This much churning is actionable."

"He's my son."

She didn't look at me. I remember Gerry when he was married to Elizabeth. After Geraldine's operation, Elizabeth took the boys back to Denmark and changed all their names. I was the one who scraped Gerry up off the bathroom floor, called the ambulance, stuck my fingers down his throat to make her vomit however many pills were still in her stomach.

We sat watching the flying black dots, which at this distance might have been anything at all.

I took a cab to the Conquistador, stopping on the way at the Book Nook on Sunset. The cabbie was delighted to go all the way up the coast

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to the Conquistador. He had even heard of it. "You know, industry people used to stay there. Sam Waldman and his people, they used to go there all the time. Take over the whole place for planning a movie or editing or maybe just partying. Place was a lot grander then. You know that?"

I told him I did.

Nobody recognized me. Nobody commented that my only luggage was three hundred dollars worth of oversized books. Nobody appeared to carry the books to my room, which had one cracked window pane and a bedspread with cigarette burns. My books were the newest thing in the room, and the *Historia Monstrorum* was a 1948 reprint.

I learned that the griffin was the most mysterious of tomb symbols. That it dated back to the second millennium. That the Minoan griffin was the one with the mane of black spiral curls. That the griffin was the most predatory of all mythical monsters, guarding treasures and feeding on live human hearts. That Milton had mentioned a "hippogriff," presumably a hybrid of a hybrid. The Sumerians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Chaldeans, Egyptians, Myceneans, Indo-Iranians, Syrians, Scythians, and Greeks all had griffins. And so did Greater Los Angeles.

I sat by the window past midnight, smoking and watching the sky, waiting for Gerry to call. Clouds scudded over the moon: fantastic shapes, writhing and soaring. Smoke rose from the end of my cigarette in spiral curls. Somewhere, beyond the window in the unseen darkness, something snapped.

Once, when Brad had been very small, I had fallen sick with something-or-other; who can remember? But there had been fever, chills, nausea. The housekeeper had run off with the gardener and sixteen steaks. My soon-to-be-ex had been off doing what already-ex's do; Richard always did like a jump on deadlines. The phone line had gone down in a windstorm. For forty-eight hours, it had been me, Brad, and several million germs. And at one point I had lost it, wailing louder than both wind and baby, lead performer in the Greek chorus.

Brad had stopped dead and crept close to my bed. He peered at me, screwing up his small face. Then he had called jubilantly, "Towl! Towl!" and run to fetch a grimy dish rag with which to smear Liquid Gold across my face. This had become one of my most precious memories. *What will I be when I grow up, Mommy?*

There was wind tonight, blowing from the sea. I could smell it. Sometime past midnight, the phone rang.

"Celia? Gerry. Listen, love—I'm coming up there."

"That bad? Come on, Gerry, tell me. We're both too old for drama."

I could hear her thinking. As an agent, he used to conduct deals while pulling leaves off the *ficus benjamina* by his office phone. In a good year, his exfoliation topped United Logging's.

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"He sold the waterfront properties, Celia. Both of them. Not a bad price, but invested wildly. And he's too far extended. You can recover some if you clip his wings right now, today, but the whole house of cards will still be shaky. You'll come out with less than a fourth of what you had, with the stock churning counted in. You're not a bag lady on Sunset yet, but it's not good. And it's actionable."

"I hear something else you're not telling me."

"The media is going wild. Cherlyn's in labor."

"*Now?*"

"Now."

"It's only eight months!"

"Yeah, but with this . . . baby, they're saying the womb just couldn't hold on any longer. That's what they're saying—what the hell do I know? I'm leaving now to get you."

"I'll take a cab."

"You can't afford it," Gerry said brutally, and hung up. I understood. She would do whatever she could to persuade me to sue Brad. Maybe I would let her. I packed up my books and called a cab. Then I left the books on the ratty unused bed. The Conquistador seemed a good place for them.

The cab could only get a block away from the hospital. I pushed my way on foot through the crowds, argued my way through the police cordon, slunk my way past the TV cameras, blustered my way through the lobby. "I'm Miss Lincoln's mother-in-law." "I'm Miss Lincoln's mother." "Miss Lincoln . . . the baby . . . the grandmother . . ."

More TV, more reporters. Shouts, chaos, trampled styrofoam cups. A huge nurse in a blinding pink uniform grabbed my arm and hauled me into an elevator, closing the doors so fast I lost my purse.

"Pretty fierce, huh?" she said, and laughed. Jowls of fat danced on her shoulders. She winked at me. I wished Brad had married *her*.

He was in the recovery room with Cherlyn, but the main show was already over and a helpful intern hauled him out and then tactfully disappeared. I wished Brad had married *him*. Half-lit, the corridor had the hushed creepiness of all hospitals late at night.

"Mother! You're a grandma!"

He wore a surgical gown and mask, looking like a natural. I opened my mouth to say—what? I still don't know—but he rushed on. "She's perfect! Wait till you see her! Little Angela Dawn. Perfect. And Cherlyn's fine, she's resting up for the press conference. Of course, we want you there, too! This is a great day!"

"Brad—"

"*Perfect.* You never saw such a baby," which had of course to be true enough. "We're going to bring her out wrapped up at first, let them see

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her face and hair—she's got all this hair, dark like yours, Mother—and just gradually be persuaded to unwrap her. Maybe not even today. Maybe not even tomorrow. We've forbidden cameras in the hospital, of course."

"I—"

"Wait till you see her!" And then he stopped.

And I knew. Knew before he turned to me in the middle of the hall, before he took my arm, before he smiled at me with that blinding sincerity that could sell vacuum tubes to Sony. I knew what he was going to say, and what I was going to say, although up till that moment it had been as much in doubt as Cherlyn's cerebrum.

He laid his hand on my shoulder. "You'll want to set up a trust fund for your first grandchild."

"I'm suing you for mismanagement of funds."

We stared at each other. I felt suddenly exhausted, and sickened, and old. *Towl, towl.*

"Wait!" a voice croaked. "Wait, wait, don't start the press without me, you bastard!"

Cherlyn wheeled herself around the corner in a pink motorized wheelchair, followed by a shocked and gibbering nurse. Cherlyn wore a pink gown with bunnies on it, but her hair still lay against her head in damp coils and sweat glistened on her forehead. One of the nurses grabbed at her hand to snatch it away from the "Forward" button; Cherlyn half-turned in her chair, clawed with three-inch nails at the nurse, and gasped with pain herself. I winced. An hour ago she had been in labor.

"You were going without me! You were going *without* me!"

I saw Brad's state-of-the-art calculation. "Of course we weren't, darling! Cherlyn, honey, you shouldn't be up!"

"You wanted to start without *me*, you bastard!"

The nurse gasped, pressing a tissue to the wicked scratches on her arm. Brad knelt tenderly beside the wheelchair, murmuring endearments. Cherlyn gave him the look of Gorgon for Perseus. She tried to slap him, but winced again when she raised her hand.

Brad shuffled backwards to avoid the slap and backed into the knees of a scandalized nurse carrying the baby. "Miss Lincoln! Miss Lincoln! You shouldn't be up!"

"Well, that's what *I* told her," said the first nurse, still holding her arm and glaring at Cherlyn.

The baby nurse tried to squeeze past. Brad reached out and tried to take the baby, a pink-wrapped bundle, from her arms.

"Mr. Felder! You don't have on your surgical mask! This baby is going straight to the high-security nursery!"

"Nuts," Brad said. "This little darling has a press conference to go to."

He reached for the baby with both hands. The nurse held it tighter.

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Cherlyn reached up from the wheelchair, grimacing with pain and fury. "Give me that baby! I *had* that baby!"

I leaped forward to—what? Add two more hands to the ones pulling the baby? Brad, being the strongest, won. He wrenched the blanketed bundle from the nurse and pushed her hard enough so she staggered back against the corridor wall. Somewhere in the distance I heard a low rumble, like an advancing horde of barbarians.

"Brad!" Cherlyn shrieked. "Give me that baby!" She began to pound at his knees.

Brad hesitated. One nurse huddled, wild-eyed, against the wall. The other, made of sterner stuff, suddenly sprinted down the corridor in the unblocked direction, probably going for help. That seemed to decide him. He turned on his blinding grin and lowered the baby—tenderly, tenderly—into its mother's arms.

"There, Cherlyn, darling—don't fret, you've been through hell, poor darling. Here she is. You have her now, everything's all right, here she is."

Cherlyn clutched the baby, shooting him a look of pure hatred. "You were *going without me!*"

"No, no, never, darling, you misunderstood. God, look at you, look at both of you!" Overcome by the sight of so much maternity, Brad passed his hand in front of his eyes.

Cherlyn glared at him. "That nurse will have doctors here to take her to the nursery in a minute. If we're going to hit the press, let's go!"

"In one second. Just after *Mother* sees the baby. Your first grandchild, Mother—God, I remember how important Grammy was to me growing up! I would have known a real and profound loss if that special grandparent-grandchild bond had ever been interfered with!"

There were tears in his eyes. Until he was six, Grammy had thought his name was Rod.

Brad took my arm and led me over to the wheelchair. At the other end of the corridor, doors were flung open. I saw a long look pass between Cherlyn and Brad, and then I forgot them both because Cherlyn was peeling the pink blanket back from the quiet bundle.

The baby opened her eyes.

I looked at little Angela Dawn and stepped back. The room faded, righted itself. There were people in it: doctors ordering, Cherlyn shouting, Brad. Brad, my son. He was looking at me levelly, for the moment giving me his whole attention, that treasure all children are supposed to want from their parents. Backwards, backwards. It's always been clear who holds the treasure, who is the thief that risks being torn apart to approach it. Who is the predator that feeds on whose human hearts.

Brad said softly, "Isn't she beautiful?"

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"Yes," I said. She was.

He went on, "You wouldn't wreck her future, would you, Mother? You wouldn't let her little life start with her grandmother suing her father?"

I said nothing, but he knew. With a satisfied smile he kissed me and went back to fighting off the doctors who would interfere with his press conference for such a trivial purpose as the baby's health. I slipped away in the other direction, past the elevators, down corridors till I found an empty waiting room and sat down.

He didn't know. Being Brad, he might not know for a long time. Being Brad, he might never know. But *I* knew. The second I saw the baby, I *knew*.

The unseen risks, the unseen connections. I started to laugh. Poor Brad—and he might never even really know. And neither would anyone else unless Cherlyn related her dream, which I doubted she could even remember. Probably not even Angela Dawn, beautiful little Angela Dawn, would ever know. Only I. Unless one day, in a fit of grandmotherly affection, I held her firmly from rising up off my lap and told her. I would tell her about the moment I first knew: the moment she opened her beautiful eyes.

They were black, not the blue of most newborns but black: night-black, ancient-black. Silky black curls spiraled over her soft head. Babies are not supposed to see well, but it seemed to me that she saw me, saw us all with those dark fierce predator's eyes fixed on her parents' faces.

Someone rushed into the little room, jabbered at me, and turned on the TV. I didn't stay. I didn't need to see the press conference for this little genetically engineered living marvel. I had seen Angela Dawn's eyes.

I didn't need to see the wings. ●

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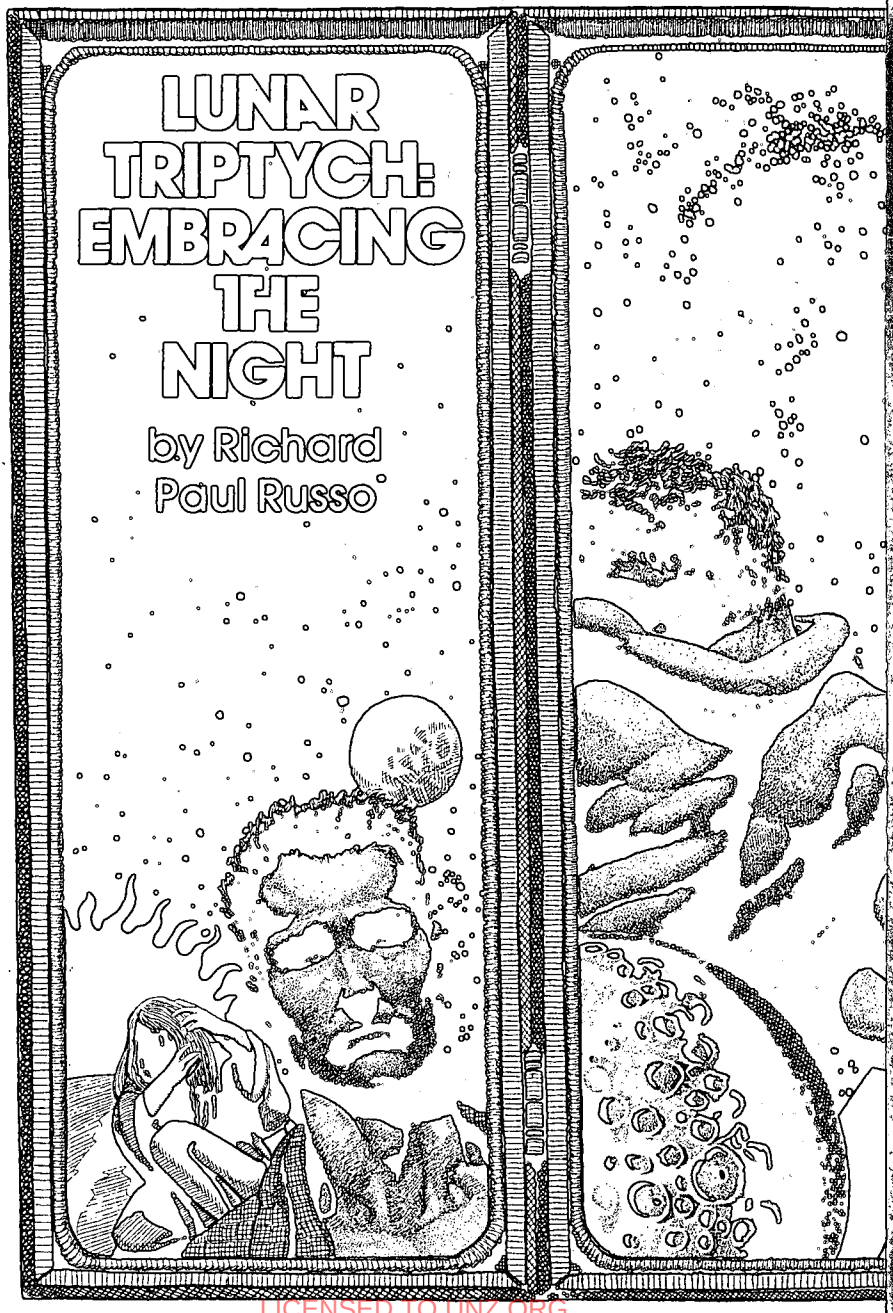
LUNAR TRIPTYCH: EMBRACING THE NIGHT

by Richard Paul Russo



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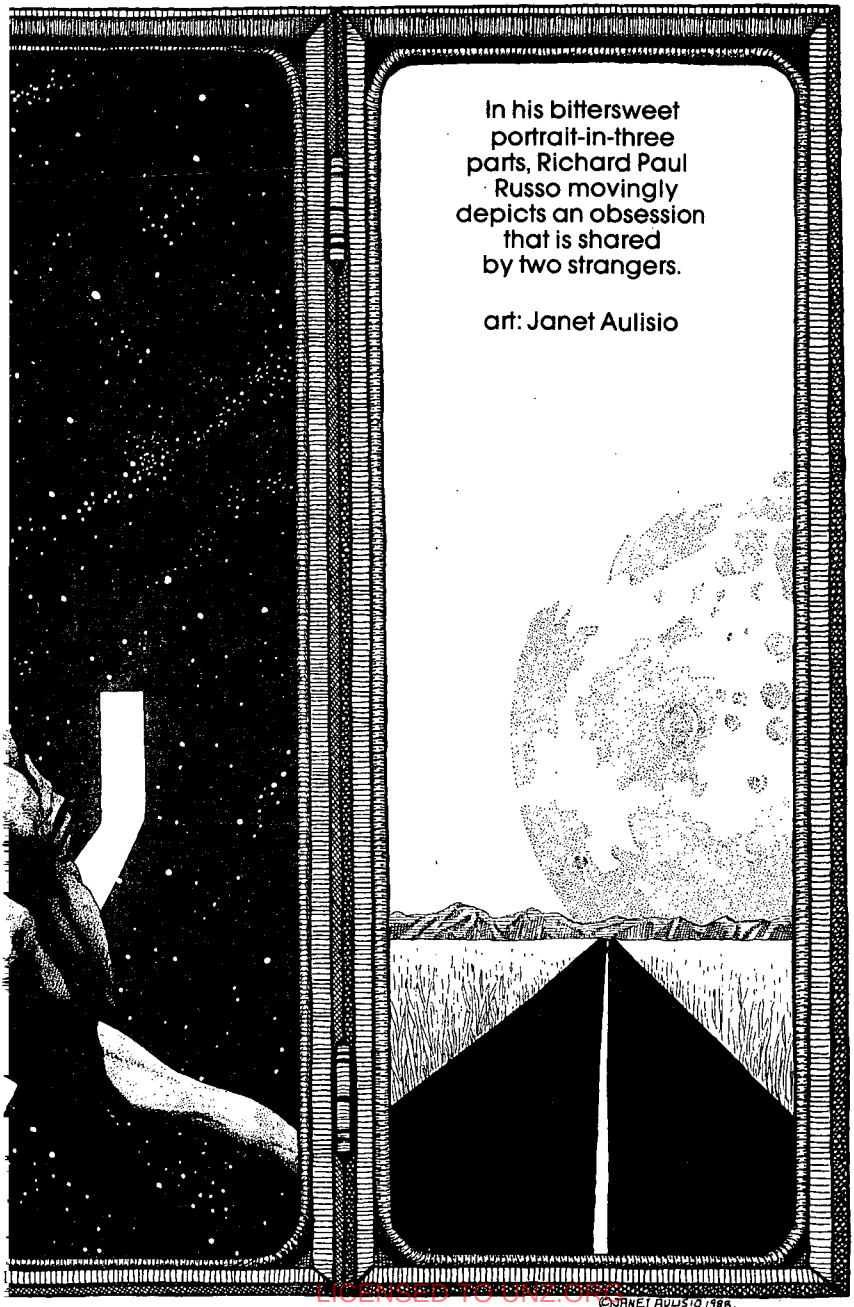

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SIDE PANEL

You must not embrace the night, Karyn said.

Carter did not understand. In part, she was telling him to stay on Earth, to stay off the shuttles; but there was little chance of spaceflight for him, or anyone, in the near future, and they had been through all that before. So what was she trying to tell him now?

Carter stepped out onto the apartment balcony and looked up into the night sky. He left the sliding door open so Karyn could follow, but he knew she would stay inside. For seven and a half weeks now Karyn had not once left the apartment unless the sun was out, the sky clear and blue without a trace of cloud.

Far to the west, across the open plaza and just above the lowest building of the apartment complex, Carter could see the lights of the gantry blinking in the warm night air, flickering like the stars overhead. He sat in the chair nearest the railing, where he could look down at the smallest of the plaza's three pools, five stories directly below him. Although it was close to midnight, a lone figure swam steadily back and forth, in and out of the cone of light from the underwater lamp. The swimmer—a woman, he thought—did not slow or miss a beat, even when making the smooth flip-turns at each end of the pool. Perfectly at home in the water, even though not born to it.

Maybe that was the analogy he needed for his testimony at the Congressional hearings, Carter thought. That there were people, like the swimmer, always at home in the water, while others never were. The same should be true of outer space, he believed, and he could see no reason for halting manned space exploration because of those who could *not* go into space. The answer was to go on with those who could.

Carter's hand reached to his empty shirt pocket, a reflex action that remained even after four years. Right now he wished he still smoked. His hands wanted something to do.

"Are you coming to bed?" Karyn asked.

Carter turned to look through the open doorway at her. Fair-haired, fair-skinned, she was already between the white sheets, wrapped in a heavy flannel nightgown and propped against the headboard, the white spread pulled up over her bent knees. One of the two lamps on the stand beside her was lit, and she reached over to switch on the other.

Karyn would not even sleep in the dark any more. At night there was at least one light on in each room of the apartment, illuminating her nocturnal wanderings which were growing more frequent; she rarely slept the night through now. Two weeks earlier, when she had only a single lamp on the nightstand, the bulb had gone out at three in the morning, plunging the room into darkness. Karyn had jerked up convulsively, instantly awake and screaming. Her screams had continued

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until Carter managed to retrieve the living room lamp and plug it in, returning light to the bedroom. Now Karyn slept with two lamps next to her, spare bulbs in easy reach.

Carter turned back to look down at the pool, but the swimmer had emerged from the water and now sat in a lounge chair, looking up at him, wearing dark sunglasses. He felt certain it was the same woman he had seen around the complex lately, often enough so it seemed she was following him. With black hair, and always wearing the sunglasses, she only appeared at night. Maybe she thought the darkness and the sunglasses gave her some kind of protection. She never spoke to him, but when he encountered her she watched him continuously, her head turning to follow wherever he went, and he wished that just once he could see her eyes.

He watched the woman a few moments longer, her face still directed up towards him, glanced once more at the gantry lights in the distance, then stood and went inside.

"You *are* going to testify tomorrow, aren't you?" Karyn asked as he got into bed next to her.

"Yes."

She sighed heavily, shook her head. "It doesn't much matter," she said. "Your testimony won't help anyway, it's too late now, the verdict's almost in."

"Probably so."

There was a long silence, and they lay beside each other without touching. Carter could not remember the last time they had made love. It had been back in their house in Massachusetts, that was all he knew. Not once since they had moved out here and into this apartment.

"The eternal night," Karyn whispered. "We aren't meant to join it."

Carter rolled onto his side and looked at her. This was new, like what she had said earlier. She was beginning to sound like a newly converted mystic.

"Can't you see the pattern, Carter? All the problems, the accidents, the mechanical failures, the nervous breakdowns, and now the collapse of the Mars Expedition. They'll go on, growing worse all the time until we stop trying, until we realize we belong here, only on Earth. Until we stop trying to leave."

Carter did not know what to say. He had heard the same ideas before; they had all heard them, more often in recent weeks. Voiced by what NASA liked to call the "lunatic fringe." For a while it had been a kind of in joke. Luna, lunatic. But with the Congressional hearings nearly concluded, and the effective demise of NASA practically a foregone conclusion, the joke had quickly paled.

He turned over and looked out through the glass door, unable to see

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much of the night with the two lamps burning brightly behind him. He tried to sleep, but his eyes remained open, and he began to wish he had sunglasses of his own to shade his eyes as he searched for sleep, for signs of the night sky.

CENTER PANEL

Two nights after the Congressional hearings had ended, there was an enormous outdoor party at the apartment complex, celebrating the end of NASA and manned exploration of space. Residents and invited guests only were permitted, but still Carter guessed there were nearly six hundred people milling around the main pool and through the lush plaza lit by a hundred burning torches, dancing on the large cement patios to the loud music of a local rock band. The music was techno-punk, complete with rainbowed lasers blazing forth from the instruments. Carter stood at the balcony railing, watching, and wondered how all these people, many of whom would soon be losing their jobs, could be so happy.

He turned and looked into the bedroom through the screen door at Karyn, who sat in a corner chair reading.

"You want to go down to the party?" he asked, knowing she wouldn't. "This ought to be your victory celebration."

She looked up at him, but didn't respond. Carter shrugged and opened the screen door, stepped inside. "I'm going down," he said. He slid the door shut and started towards the hall.

"Wait," she said. "Before you go . . ."

Carter stopped, turned, and leaned against the wall, watching her.

"I've lost you, Carter."

Yes, he thought, a long time ago, though he had not really known it, or known why. "Do you really want me?" he asked.

"Not any more. We've become too . . . different."

No, we've always been different, we just never saw it. But he did not say anything.

"I wanted to wait until the hearings were finished," she said. "Until you were done. I've already talked to an attorney. I told him I didn't think there would be any problems, any fighting. That it would be an amicable divorce."

He looked at her for a long time without speaking, then nodded once. "All right," he said.

"I want the house."

He nodded again. "It's yours." He paused for a moment, then added, "The kids, too."

She turned away from him, her fingers trembling for a moment before she clasped her hands together. They had no children.

"I'm sorry," he said, meaning it.

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She breathed deeply twice. "You can have the car." Another pause, another deep breath. "I'm leaving tomorrow morning. Will you drive me to the train station?"

"Of course."

She looked back at him. "What will you do now, Carter? Your job won't last much longer."

He shrugged. "I really don't know."

Karyn nodded, returned her attention to her book, and said no more. So simple, Carter thought. He turned away from her and walked out.

At the edge of the plaza, Carter hesitated a moment, then pushed into the crowd. He welcomed the press of people, the feel of bodies in motion and close contact, flesh touching flesh. He breathed deeply, inhaling the aroma of sweat and smoke and pot, alcohol and perfume, the gas-like smell of the torches. The babble of the crowd was almost as loud as the band, and the noise, too, he relished. He felt lost and anonymous, and was content.

Carter passed one of the open bars and squeezed up to the counter, where he ordered scotch on the rocks. Drink in hand, he pushed back into the crowd. As he neared the elevated stage, the music and singing from the band became more distinct. Surprisingly, some of the lyrics were intelligible, though shouted rapidly, almost erupting from the singer's mouth. He caught the words "silver" and "light" and "sucking illusions," and the word "night" repeated several times, but he could never quite make any sense of what he heard.

A hand gripped his shoulder, pulled him around. Carter found himself staring into dark sunglasses reflecting torchlight directly back at him. The woman.

She smiled, hooked her arm through his, and led him through the crowd. He didn't resist, too curious. She was dressed in a short, dark jumper, her legs bare, her feet in white ballet slippers. As they passed another of the bars, Carter quickly finished his drink and set the empty glass on the counter.

The woman led the way towards the lobby of the south building. The security guard, recognizing them both, let them through without a word. When the door closed behind them, a heavy quiet filled the lobby.

They stood in front of the elevator doors, waiting. Her glasses were so dark and mirrored he could not see her eyes, only a doubled, distorted version of himself reflected back at him.

"My name is Carter," he said.

"I know. Carter Strang. I'm Nicole."

"How do you know me?"

The elevator opened, Nicole smiled, and they stepped inside. Nicole

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touched the sixth floor circle, which lit up a pale orange. She leaned back against the elevator wall, looking at him, and they began to rise.

"I know you," she said. "You've shot up. To the stations, to Luna."

She made it sound like a drug trip. Maybe that was how she saw it.

"I follow all the astronauts," she went on. "All who leave this prison and sail up into the night."

Carter started to protest, then said nothing. He never thought of himself as an astronaut. He was a head psychologist for NASA, so he had made seven previous trips off Earth—four tours of the stations and three trips to Luna. But people like Nicole saw them all as astronauts, and it would not matter what he said to her about it.

They stopped at the sixth floor and the elevator doors slid apart. Carter hesitated before leaving the elevator; he was beginning to realize what she was. But something, simple curiosity perhaps, continued to draw him, and he followed her along the hall.

"I watched the hearings on TV," Nicole said. "I watched when you talked. They didn't listen to you, but I did, and *I* understood what you were trying to tell them."

Carter wasn't so sure he had understood himself, and almost asked her to explain it to him, but he didn't. At the fifth door on the right, Nicole stopped and inserted a key. Before she turned it she reached out with her other hand and took his arm.

"Quickly, please," she said. She turned the key and opened the door just enough to reach inside. Carter could see that the interior of the apartment was brightly lit, but only for a moment. Nicole's hand touched a switch, the apartment went dark, and she pulled him inside, closing the door behind them.

Points of fluorescent light, thousands of them like stars in the night sky, were everywhere. Walls, ceiling, furniture, even the floor sparkled with the tiny pinpoints of silver. Although he did not recognize any constellations, Carter would not have been surprised to see one.

There was enough light from all the fluorescent dots to barely make out furniture outlines, to see Nicole just a foot away. She faced him and slowly removed her sunglasses. He had expected her eyes to be something special, shining with a strange, dazzling light, but they appeared to be quite ordinary. In the darkness he could not make out their color.

"What you were saying was so right," she said. "About some people being at home in the water, and some being terrified of it no matter how well they swam, and how that's how it is with space, that some people can't handle it, but that some people *can*, that some people might even be more at home in space than on Earth. *I* understand. *I* believe you're right, because I think that that's where I belong, out in deep space among all the stars."

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She took his hand and gently guided him along the short hall into the bedroom. He knew he should leave, perhaps should never have come in at all, but he was still too curious.

The bedroom was like the rest of the apartment, dark and filled with stars. Carter had trouble maintaining his balance, his referents hazy, almost invisible—he felt cast adrift, loose and without moorings.

In front of the sliding glass door that led out onto the balcony was a telescope. It was directed slightly downward and to the east. Carter walked unsteadily to it and looked into the eyepiece.

As he expected, the telescope was trained on the balcony of his apartment. He could see the bright glow emanating from the bedroom, and wondered if Karyn was still reading, or sleeping . . . or packing to leave the next morning.

"Come here," Nicole whispered.

Carter turned toward her, shaking his head. It was time to go.

Nicole reached for him, a dark phantom, and he backed away, jostling the telescope. He turned from her and, still disoriented, staggered out of the bedroom. His lungs seemed to tighten, cutting his breath, and he bumped into walls twice moving along the hallway.

"Carter, come back," Nicole called, little more than a whisper.

He stumbled through the front room, crashed into a chair, then found the front door and opened it. He stepped out into the light of the hall, closed the door quickly behind him and leaned against it, breathing heavily.

The terrible thing was, he *did* want to go back to her, despite the dizziness, despite the fear. But he couldn't. Not yet.

After a minute or two his breathing was almost back to normal, his balance steady. Surprised that Nicole had not followed him, but relieved, Carter pushed away from the door and started slowly down the hall.

Emerging from the elevator and into the lobby, Carter saw a vaguely familiar man dressed in a dark suit seated in one of the chairs near the street entrance. The man stood—he was tall and large with sandy, gray-streaked hair—and casually approached. His tie was loose, top shirt button undone.

"Carter Strang? I'm William Knopfler, with the Defense Department." He put out his hand. "We've met once before."

"I think twice, actually," Carter said. They shook hands. "And I believe I saw you at the hearings."

"I was extremely interested in what you had to say."

"No one else was."

Knopfler smiled. "Let's go for a walk. I'd like to talk to you."

"What about?"

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"A job. You're probably going to need one soon." The smile didn't falter. Carter gave Knopfler a half smile in return, and nodded.

Knopfler led the way out through the street entrance, into warm fresh air and relative quiet. The sounds of the party were muted, distant, and street traffic was light, just an occasional car or truck driving slowly past. They began walking along the sidewalk around the complex, silent at first, but eventually Knopfler started speaking.

"What interested me was your idea about people having an ingrained affinity, established either by genetics or early life, for a specific environment. Also the converse, that people have ingrained antipathies to different environments. Of particular interest was the notion that these affinities and antipathies, especially subtle and complex variants thereof—things much more delicate and specific, for example, than simple claustrophobia—can be detected and identified through more refined, precise, and extensive procedures than currently exist."

Knopfler paused, and Carter felt he was waiting for a response. He looked up at the sky, but though there were no clouds, the stars were dimmed by the rising glow of the city lights.

"As you say, it's just a notion." Carter shrugged. "I've never really had the opportunity to develop anything along those lines. And as the committee chairperson pointed out so emphatically, I do not really have any empirical evidence to support my ideas. A notion, yes. Nothing more."

"Just a gut feeling?" Knopfler offered.

"I suppose."

They passed a break in the buildings, where a gate led into the plaza, and for a few moments the noise increased, then gradually faded again.

"Several of my colleagues and I give your ideas much credence, however, and we would like you to work for us."

"Why? Manned space flight will be effectively defunct, at least for the next few years. Unless you're looking at long term . . ."

Knopfler shook his head. "We aren't interested in space flight. We're not interested in space at all, not from a human standpoint." He paused to light a cigarette, but did not offer one to Carter. "We have recently developed new high-tech fighting suits for our infantry. You may have heard something about them."

"Something, yes."

"They are completely self-enclosed, self-contained, computer-monitored, designed to be worn around the clock for days at a time, even weeks. We've done extensive testing in labs, on domestic bases and training grounds, testing of both the suits and the soldiers, and now we've begun field testing in the jungles of Guatemala." Knopfler paused, inhaled on his cigarette. "Frankly, we've had a few problems not unlike those encountered by the Mars Expedition. The Rigger syndrome, some

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have started to call it. The men we've sent into the field, none of them have claustrophobia, all of them have spent at least two continuous weeks during training inside the suits without once breaking the body or helmet seals, and all with no adverse effects, no panic reactions, nothing like that. And yet, some of them, within hours of being dropped into the jungle inside their suits, have . . . fallen apart. Panic reactions, auditory and visual hallucinations, complete breakdowns. Nothing like a majority, just a few here and there. But a significant number. I'm sure you can understand that we cannot afford that happening in actual military operations."

Knopfler stopped, apparently finished, and they continued their circuit of the complex in silence for some time.

"And what is it you want from me?" Carter finally asked.

"We want you to develop a testing and evaluation program along the lines of what you suggested for the space program, capable of identifying those who will thrive in the fighting suits under various conditions—jungle, desert, mountains, snow, urban centers—and those who will not. We offer you a position with complete freedom, choice of staff, whatever facilities you require. There will be large financial and technical resources at your disposal. You will be allowed essentially to do whatever you want, explore any lines of research you wish, within reason." Knopfler smiled. "What more could you ask for?"

"Why have you come here to talk to me?" Carter asked. "Why tonight?"

"We've tried reaching you at your office. You haven't shown there since the hearings. We are under some time pressure, pressure to produce success. The problems in the field have, on occasion, been serious. We have had . . . a few deaths. As you are more aware than most, money is becoming difficult for everyone, and mistakes and failures are not much tolerated. We, too, are in danger of losing funding for this program, and we'd like your assistance as soon as possible. In fact, if you accept, we will want to fly you into Guatemala immediately."

They had completed the circuit and now stopped, once again at the street entrance to the south building. Knopfler dropped his cigarette to the cement, crushed it with a brief twisting motion of his shoe.

"I'll need time to think about it," Carter said.

"Of course. I don't expect an answer tonight. But tomorrow would be best."

Carter nodded. The entire proposition seemed absurd to him, but he could not tell Knopfler that.

Knopfler handed him a white card with only his name and two telephone numbers. "Any time, day or night."

Carter nodded again, pocketed the card. They shook hands, then Knopfler turned and strode down the street without another word. Carter

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remained in front of the building and listened to the crisp, regular footsteps retreat into the night.

Carter walked through the hushed quiet of the lobby, then opened the door to the blast of sound from the party still going strong. He continued along a short stretch of empty cobblestone, and pushed his way back into the throng.

If anything, there were more people now than before, and Carter could hardly move of his own accord. Instead, he let the flow and surge of the crowd guide him randomly about the plaza, and he was reminded of film clips he'd seen of Carnival in Rio. The band had cranked up the amps another notch or two, but still only barely managed to overcome the shouts and laughter of the crowd.

Somehow he ended up with a drink in his hand, scotch fortunately, and he sipped at it as he was bumped and shoved along. Near the main pool, the crush eased, then broke up completely leaving a perimeter of relatively clear space around the pool's edge. People sat in pool chairs, lay on chaise longues, talking and drinking and laughing. Carter squeezed free of the crowd and wandered among the chairs until he spotted an empty one and sat in it. Next to him, two people squirmed about inside a sleeping bag, only the tips of their heads visible.

A roar welled up to his right, and when Carter turned to look, he saw a giant ball, ten or twelve feet in diameter, bouncing slowly up and down along a jungle of upraised hands. The ball was gray, with patterns and words he could not yet distinguish. It looked like the kind of giant inflated ball he had first seen as a kid at an Earth Day Festival, a hippie holdover celebration his mother had taken him to once. Then, the large, stitched leather ball filled with air had been called an Earth Ball, and had been painted with swirls and slashes of bright colors. But as this gray Earth Ball rolled and bobbed closer, Carter saw that it had been painted with craters and maria to resemble the moon. Graffiti had been added, slogans of the protesters who had marched outside the gates of the launch fields day after day for the last few months—NO MORE $$ FOR $PACE; YANKEE STAY HOME; STOP ASKING FOR THE MOON!

The people lost control of the ball, and it began rolling over them towards the pool, gradually picking up speed though hands shot into the air to try to stop it. Near the edge of the crowd a few people were knocked to the ground by the weight and momentum of the ball as it struck them and tumbled to the ground. It bounced across several chairs, jolting people and spilling drinks, then rolled into the pool with a splash. A cheer erupted as the large, gray ball floated serenely about the pool.

Carter finished his drink, set the glass under his chair, and was about to get up when a gunshot sounded from nearby. A few cries cut the air,

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then gradually transformed into laughter and more cheers as air hissed out of the new hole in the ball. Carter remained in the chair and watched the Moon Ball slowly deflate until it was just a limp, bulging mass floating listlessly across the surface of the water.

Carter got up from the chair and slowly worked his way towards his building, searching the faces around him for a pair of dark sunglasses. Why did he want to find her again? What was it about her that both frightened and intrigued him? Why did flashes of her apartment—the telescope, the vast array of bright dots, the star-covered bed—keep rising in his mind?

He entered his building, nodded to the security guard. Instead of going to the elevators, Carter approached the stairwell, opened the door. He stepped through, let the door slam shut behind him, and began climbing.

The stairwell was quiet, the air hollow and warm, the cement walls echoing each of his footsteps. For a moment he felt as if he was walking along the hushed, hollow corridors of one of the stations—Luther King, Lagrange, Challenger.

Challenger. The space program had hardly stuttered following the *Challenger* disaster with its seven deaths, had hardly missed a beat, had in some ways emerged stronger than ever. Carter had been a teenager at the time, and it hadn't fazed him either, hadn't dulled his own fascination with space, his own dream of one day traveling to the stars.

But now the program was not going to survive the Mars Expedition. No deaths, but the aborted mission had capped a decade of other space-related injuries and deaths, of mishaps and unexplained mechanical failures, equipment breakdowns, mistakes in judgment, rumors of deliberate sabotage, all of which seemed to increase steadily each year, leading to growing dissatisfaction among the public, graver doubts in Congress, and eventually to the massive protests and demonstrations. When the Mars Expedition had aborted, one more colossal failure, the program had no more support to fall back on. It was doomed the day *Explorer* turned back.

At the top floor, Carter rested a minute, then continued up the final flight of steps to the roof. He unlocked the door with his apartment key, and stepped out.

The air was warm, and the moon was bright above him, nearly full. The noise of the party rose from the plaza and drifted over the edge of the roof, but it was hushed, more like the surf of an empty beach.

Half a dozen pool chairs were scattered about, but otherwise the roof was deserted. Carter walked to the nearest chair and sat, feeling suddenly very tired. He adjusted the arms so he lay halfway back and could look directly at the moon and stars above him. Once again his hand moved to his empty shirt pocket, fumbled at it before returning to his side.

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Luna.

The last time he'd been there was to assist in the debriefing of the *Explorer* crew. He still vividly remembered the sight of Rigger emerging from *Explorer*, nearly catatonic, his eyes wide, staring, but unseeing, his entire body trembling. And Carter would never forget that incredible sigh of despair that issued from Rigger just before he collapsed to his knees, sobbing and shaking his head.

Luna. It was quickly moving out of reach, and now Knopfler wanted him to go to Guatemala to help better prepare men—not for the exploration of space, but for war on Earth.

Carter breathed in deeply, sat up, then stood. He walked across the roof, gravel crunching under his shoes. At the roof's edge he leaned against the low railing and gazed down at the crowd surging about the plaza. The deflated Moon Ball still floated in the main pool, motionless at the side, lodged in the gutter.

No, Knopfler did not understand him at all. He had made an offer of what he thought Carter wanted and needed, but the man clearly did not understand. Carter could not accept Knopfler's offer. If he did, if he went to Guatemala to work with the military, helping soldiers to fight in wars, he would ground himself to Earth in a way that would be irreversible. He would become so grounded that if the space program ever revived he would be completely useless to it, and that was something he could not accept.

No, Knopfler did not understand him. Neither did Karyn. No one really did, with the strange, possible exception of . . .

Carter pressed against the railing and looked straight down at the small swimming pool below him. It was empty, but a foot from the edge, seated in a chair and looking up at him through dark sunglasses, was Nicole.

They watched each other for several minutes without moving, then Nicole slowly stood up from the chair. She kept her gaze on him and, after another pause, started walking towards the building. Carter did not move, and even when she disappeared into the lobby he remained motionless at the edge of the roof, waiting for her to join him.

Carter heard the door open behind him, and he turned to watch Nicole step out onto the roof. Her ballet slippers were nearly silent on the gravel as she crossed the roof to stand at his side. Once again as he looked into her sunglasses he saw his doubled reflection, but now he caught a glimpse of her eyes as well.

"Will you come now?" she asked.

Carter said nothing for a long time, though he already knew what his answer would be. He looked up at the moon, a sense of loss aching in his

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chest at the thought that he might never return to it. Maybe someday, somehow, if he could avoid closing off his options . . .

He turned back to face Nicole. "Yes, I'll come now."

They walked side by side across the roof to the door, went through it, and began their descent. Neither spoke, and Carter's chest tightened as he listened to their regular, echoing footsteps in the hollow air, his firm and sharp, hers like whispers. He was still somewhat afraid of Nicole, afraid of returning to her apartment, but he knew he would go through with it now, that it had become as important to him as it was to her.

They emerged from the stairs into the lobby, passed through it and out onto the street. Still silent, they circled around to Nicole's building, and entered. Just as they had descended from the roof by way of the stairs, they now ascended echoing stairs to the sixth floor. When they came out into the hallway they rested for a few minutes, breathing heavily. Doubts rose again, and Carter thought of withdrawing to the stairwell, descending again, but when Nicole started down the hall towards her apartment, he followed.

Entering her apartment went as it had before—Nicole unlocked the door, cracked it open to reach inside and turn off the lights, then pulled him quickly inside, closing the door and locking it behind them.

Stars again.

Though he had already seen the apartment, the sheer number of silver pinpoints managed to once again overwhelm him with a sense of vast, open space, of star-filled skies of deepest night.

As before, Nicole led him through the hall and into the bedroom, into a bright, new galaxy. This time the curtains had been pulled over the sliding glass doors so that now everything in the room was completely covered with stars.

His disorientation returned, tinged with a slight panic that threatened to grow, panic at the sensation of being cut loose from Earth and drifting without moorings through the unending night of space. Carter stood at the center of the room, swaying, unable to move.

Nicole knelt at the foot of the bed and reached for something on the floor. Four enormous globes of stars in the corners of the room, and one above him (how was it he had not noticed them before?), began to slowly rotate. More disturbing, they rotated in different directions, some laterally, some vertically, and all at varying rates.

The panic stepped up a notch, and Carter tried to move towards the bedroom door, searching for escape, but before he completed his first step he lost all sense of orientation. Vertigo overwhelmed him. All the points of light in the room began moving, even those he knew were stationary, and he started to fall.

He felt cool hands supporting him, guiding him, but it took a moment

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to realize they were Nicole's. He tried to look down at the floor, to focus on the sensation of his feet touching firm ground as an anchor to steady himself, but it was hopeless. Still supported by Nicole, he stumbled, his knees gave out, and he felt himself drifting downward and twisting to the side, felt the soft give of a mattress under his body.

Carter knew he was on his back on the bed, but was aware of little else. The stars continued to spin about him, and he felt as if the bed itself were spinning. He closed his eyes, but nothing changed. The vertigo only worsened, and the panic struck with full force, swelling in his chest and throat.

But Carter, rather than fight it, accepted the panic. He let it blossom into fear, then let the fear spread evenly throughout his body, out along his limbs to hands and feet where it smoothly leaked out of him and dissipated into the night, leaving him drained, but unafraid.

He opened his eyes again, the stars everywhere, still whirling and dancing, but the vertigo disappeared, and he began to sense the regular patterns of the stars' movement, the rhythms of their dance, and began to sense his own growing harmony with their graceful motions across the sky.

But where was the moon? For some inexplicable reason he felt he should be seeing it, that its presence was somehow crucial. Then it struck him.

I am on the moon. I have returned.

Nicole's face loomed above. Naked now, wearing only the dark glasses which reflected the stars at him, she straddled him and her hands moved to his shirt, delicately working the buttons loose, running her cool fingers along his chest and down towards his belly. Carter felt his body respond to her touch, and he brushed his fingertips lightly across the dark reflecting lenses, her soft nose, her firm mouth. Yes, he thought, this is where I belong, here among the stars. Nicole breathed in sharply and kissed his hands, pressed her hips against his.

With the blood now rushing through him, Carter reached out to embrace her, and to embrace the night as the stars continued to spin and dance in delicate, bright patterns all around them.

SIDE PANEL

Early the next morning, Carter drove Karyn to the train station, the trip endured in silence. They had nothing to say to each other any more, and he did not stay to see her off. That part of his life was over.

On the way back to the apartment he filled the car with gas, checked water and oil, brake and transmission fluids, put air in the tires. He cleaned all the windows, bought a map of the United States. On impulse,

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he stopped at a bookstore and bought maps of Canada and Mexico as well.

Carter spent the day packing whatever remained in the apartment, filling boxes and bags and suitcases, sorting through it all and deciding what he would take with him, what he would leave behind.

Knopfler called twice during the day, and Carter finally promised him an answer the following morning. By then he would be gone, and Knopfler would get no answer at all.

He would go to the mountains or the desert, that much he knew. Somewhere he could really see the stars, the moon, and the clear, black skies of night. He would be ready when the space program revived, ready if not to go into space himself, then to prepare others who would.

Night fell, and Carter loaded the car with everything he planned to take with him. Back in the apartment, he sat one more time on the balcony, the apartment dark for the first time in months. The night air was warm, the plaza below nearly empty, quiet. Someone had pulled the deflated Moon Ball out of the pool and draped it over a chaise longue.

Carter gazed up at the night sky, but though it was free of clouds, the stars above seemed dull and lifeless. The lights of the city sent up too much glow, and there were too many stars he knew should have been visible but which he could not see. Even the moon, which was rising, remained hidden, blocked from view by the brick and cement of the apartment building. This is no place to be, he thought, this is no place to live.

He looked across the plaza to the south building. In a sixth floor window he caught a glint of light, probably from the telescope. So, she was still watching him. After tonight, though, he would be gone, and she would be watching a deserted balcony, a dark and empty room.

At midnight he locked the apartment and walked out to the parking lot. Nicole stood next to his car with a single suitcase and the telescope. The building lights reflected at him from her dark glasses. Carter breathed in deeply.

All right, he thought. For now.

They squeezed the suitcase into the trunk, then packed the telescope in the back seat. He secured the lens cover, and they wrapped the telescope carefully in thick blankets, wedged it tightly into the luggage for protection.

They left under clear skies. Mountains or desert, he would decide later. He drove north, away from the city and the rows of amber street lamps. On the freeway the moon blazed down upon them, lighting the way. ●

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THREE EVOCATIONS OF THE MUTANT RAIN FOREST

by Bruce Boston

EVOLUTION

When young Charles rode the Beagle round the Cape
bound for the revelations of the Galapagos,
little did he know that war and rampant
radiation would turn this continent
he circumnavigated into a land
which would first prove his
theories of survival
and selection,
not in millennia but months,
and with like rapidity prove them
as useless as Newton's linear equations
to the curving temporal attenuations of space.

And now even his special island is rife
with protean life and the unique
and isolated species he once
cataloged with such care
have vanished
in an onslaught far more
unique and constantly changing,
more fertile than flights of pure imagination.

EXPANSION

From space, with each revolution of the planet,
the dark arboreal palimpsest seems to lengthen.
In the time lapsed motion of satellite tapes,
it swells like a gargantuan amoeba in mitosis.

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Rio. Caracas. São Paulo. The coastal cities
which survive do so by a daily confrontation.
The lines of armor clad troops advance warily,
spraying gouts of liquid fire into the wilds.

Napalm. Cyanogen. Agent Orange. A poison rain
of defoliants and excoriation falls in waves
from the decks of combat planes and choppers,
yet the flames are strangely dampened and die.

In a makeshift refugee camp, a native Indio
from the abandoned interior, drafted to fight,
sleeps in battle fatigues by his pregnant wife.
All his dreams have been transformed to frights

in which the serpentine vines he burns by day
have rooted deep within their displaced lives,
to twine and strangulate the bloody umbilical
and suffocate the breath of his unborn child.

ELAN VITAL

Beyond the claws of bestial battle,
beyond the green on green attrition,
some say a force is dwelling here
which links its manifold creations,
a rank and raging barbaric spirit,
a dim but still awakening sentience,
which touches and taints our souls
and gives rise to stray obsessions.

The banks of thunderous cumuli
stacked against the Andes range,
fall east to meet miasmic mists
which rise in streaming drifts
from the swamps of lowland basins,
and in this airborne compilation
dense and brackish figures evolve
in an endless surreal cinemontage
of unconscious organic visions.

Some say that far and farther south
beyond the Rivers Negro and Parana,
beyond the encroaching vegetation,
a retreating tribe has suffered
an enchantment and possession
in the shadow of the forest wall,
for now they divinate its growth
and foretell our changeling future
as they read the clouds' collisions.

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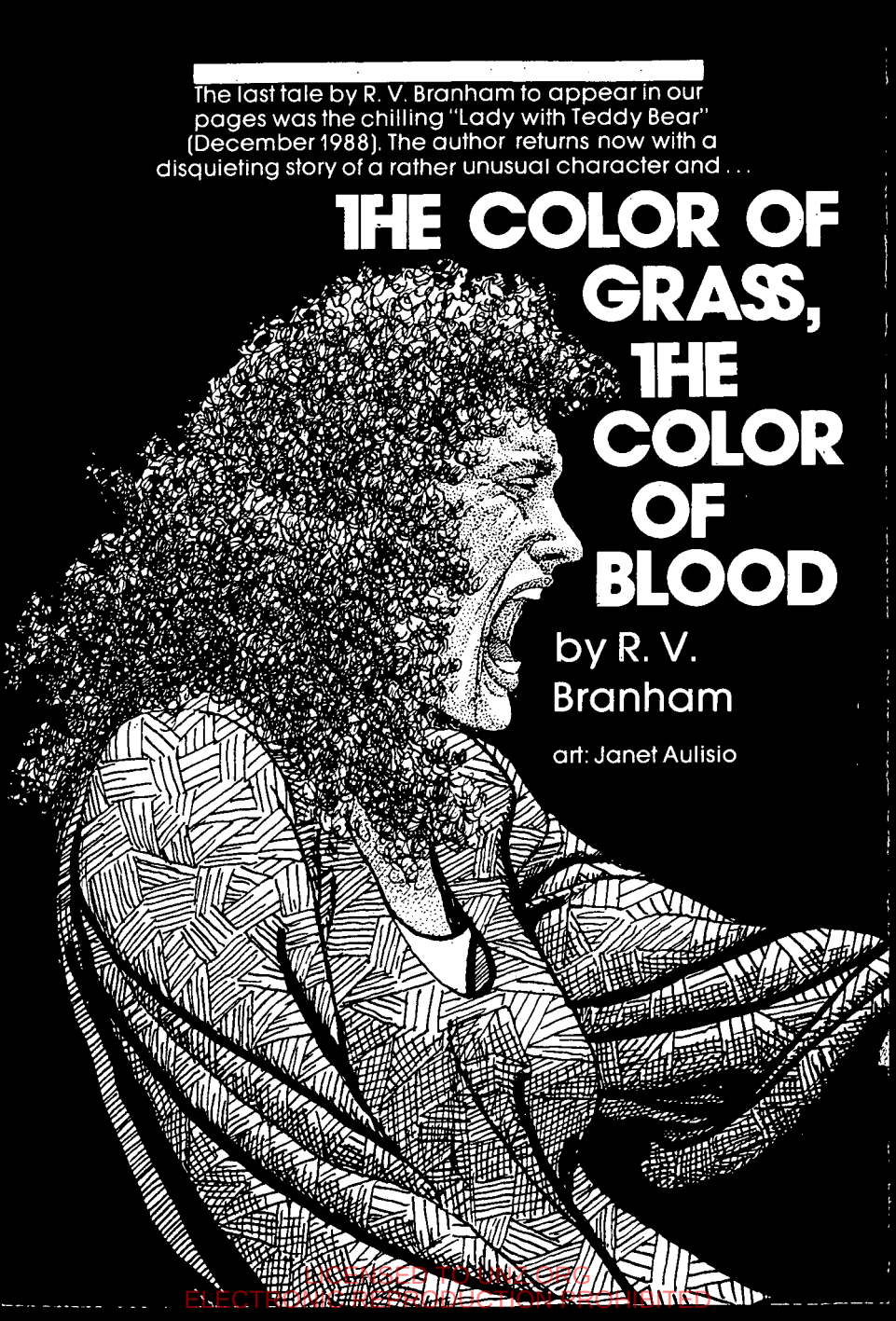
The last tale by R. V. Branham to appear in our pages was the chilling "Lady with Teddy Bear" (December 1988). The author returns now with a disquieting story of a rather unusual character and . . .

THE COLOR OF GRASS, THE COLOR OF BLOOD

by R. V. Branham

art: Janet Aulisio



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ONE: GOODMORNINGOODMORNIN

It is morning, and it has been a long long time since you lapped up the half and half they left out last night. A long long time.

You push that door farther ajar and step into their room. They're asleep: Your Lady and *That Shit,* a male who always bullies you and feeds you after he's fed *his* Seshat, your Nemesis, a fat brown and beige snotty beast whose eyes are no grey-bluer than yours, but who laid claim to this household years ago, ages ago, nearly decades/millennia/almost eons ago.

It is morning and the sun is up and Your Lady is being a shit (a lowercase shit, but a shit nonetheless), pretending to be asleep. On her side. Now you see the opportunity. She's sleeping on her side. So you leap up and decide to crouch on her ribs. She is a heavy sleeper, but if you knead enough/if you dig your claws into her ribs enough/if you perhaps draw blood the color of grass, then maybe, maybe, you will be fed.

She groans, grunts something, and tosses over, almost crushing little you, sweet little you!

He wakes up, The Shit Turd does! He'll feed you, after he's fed his Seshat. His eyes open for an instant, then shut. There is a noise, an imitation of many bees buzzing buzz. He reaches over, The Shit does, and knocks over the small table, and the buzzing stops.

He gets up and you weave into and out of his steps; he thinks you're so cute, being such a greedy guts for your breakfast . . . the condescending son of a dog. You sometimes fantasize about tripping him . . . he falls against one of the jagged shiny edges in your house. . . . And you drink the blood the color of grass as it pours from his head.

He bends down and strokes you. You purr, involuntarily. And bite him. The bite is voluntary, diabolically so.

He laughs. The Tapered Shit Turd. The Scarab's Delight. The condescending son of a dog-headed demon.

But, wait—? Where's his Seshat—? She looked a bit under last night, wouldn't budge from the sofa, even with all the racing and taunting and teasing you did last night, after Your Lady and That Shit had gone off to snore, loudly.

He leaves the room a moment—you follow . . . he's gone to look after his Seshat, that fat slob with the funny walk and the nice fur who always cleans herself, preening/posing/dozing. Not a fun Seshat at all. Not like you with your Thai-American gramma and Calico mum, your Hokusai bandit's mask and energy and speed and hunger. You're hungry, where's your breakfast?

Goodmorningoodmornin, you cry out. God, forget about that boring Seshat and feed me! That's what you say, more or less. You also hint

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about how long you've needed a new collar. One that *kills* fleas, or at least drives them away.

He *finally* comes back, after an eternity, during the which thereof you have watched the layer of tree needles deepen another paw's worth, watched the shadows shift, slightly, but damn if they have not shifted.

He gives you dry food. He always gives his Seshat the wet stuff, the good stuff, with gravy and cereal grain and *real* meat.

Not like the dried meat turds. Food pellets. Food shit.

He doesn't give that crap to *his* Seshat!

But you're hungry, so what can you do but dig in? It's a Seshat's life sometimes, sometimes. Like a smug pharoah he leans to pet your ears, which *sometimes* you *do* enjoy, so you give him your second morning bite.

TWO: THE STRANGE CAGE

He opens a high door and reaches up for something, which he eats. Later, he takes the chair and stands on it. Above the cold food place are two shelves; on the top shelf is the strange cage, which smells:

—faintly of the puddles of oil under chariots, yet the cage is solid instead of liquid,

—of shredded old papers lining the cage's bottom, reminding you of stale dead trees,

—and also of many other Seshats, including your fat Nemesis. You realize it is their *fear* that you smell.

You run to hide.

The last time he took you in that, you had to go in the chariot, with bright lights (and water from sky), and go to a place where they drugged you and cut you open and sewed you back together. All just because you'd wanted to go out and see all the males. (Males are not Seshats, who after all are the embodiment of learning and wisdom; nor can they properly be said to be Bast or Sekhet . . . They're just males, seed carriers.)

You've run to hide. But he doesn't go after *you;* he puts *his* Seshat in the strange oblong cage.

You jump on the yellow grey table and look out at the grey blue birds and the trees which someday will bury the world in needles. Needles the color of blood or of grass.

He brings the strange cage into your room, and sets it on the table. You go to see how that fat Seshat is doing. She *must* be sick, she's too tired to file a proper protest. Now, what sort of Nemesis is a very ill and very fat Seshat? You remember another time when *you* were put in that strange oblong cage, taken to *that* place again, where they poked a some-

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thing that was long up your rectum, *held* it there, and took it out and shook it, and then had the gall to pretend to *examine* it.

You would have gladly feasted on their eyeballs/the balls of their feet/their testes. Anything round enough to play with while eating it. You sometimes wonder if the male seed carriers put Your Lady's male, That Shit, up to it. Is this a male conspiracy against the Seshat?

You decide you have had enough of the strange oblong cage.

THREE: YOUR LADY'S DESK

After The Shit who lives with Your Lady has departed with *his* Seshat, you are *all* alone.

You run gleefully all over the place, finally, in your bedroom (which is only truly your bedroom when That Shit has departed) and find Your Lady still pretending to be asleep on Your Bed. (Your Lady had actually gotten up before That Shit, twice, each time getting the chair That Shit got and standing up on it and reaching for food. And each time Your Lady had ignored your requests for food.) You jump onto the bed, go up to her face, and noticing crumbs of food around her lips, begin to lick. She tosses her hands up, almost hitting you, and turns over. You go over to the other side and begin to clean yourself.

A Seshat's ablutions are a most important daily ritual, almost as important as food and water, clean sand in a clean box, strokes and pats, and the catch of the day.

It is quite tedious, boring, really. Your Lady is sleeping despite your best efforts. Your Nemesis has been taken away by That Shit who never feeds you before *his* Seshat, except when his Seshat's too sick to eat. So you take a nap, dreaming of birds to defeather/to decapitate/of balls with bells in them/of the Great River the color of grass the color of blood and of your friend Pharoah and his temples you guarded and of granaries you also guarded and of mice/better mousetraps/of dinner.

Wet food.

You wake up, much later in the morning. You can tell it is later by the play of shadow and more shadow on Your Lady.

So you get up. Stretch. Clean yourself again. And go to your favorite space, a work area with two desks. Your Lady's is the best. Stacks of paper to lounge on, drawers to hide in—although Your Lady does not like that. A strange thing happens to you, sometimes, when you are caught in a drawer: a jet of water hits you in the face. It's not *piss,* not from the other Seshat. It is unfathomable, almost preternatural. Where does that water come from?

You find an open drawer, a nice enclosed space like the box your mother

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kept you in when you were so, so little, so helpless. You climb in and go to sleep.

You hear footsteps, coming nearer. You open your eyes. Your Lady is screaming at you *out Out* OUT! She points something bright, gleaming like the sun, at you, and before you can escape you've been squirted again by that strangely anonymous water *and* been grabbed by the scruff of your neck, mewling and protesting, and taken out the front door.

Then the door slams shut!

You call out for quite a while, to no avail!

Looking up at the damn tree which is deluging the world with needles, day after week after month after season, you remember the nest, the chirrupy cherubs, the tasty baby feathery morsels. *Wet food.*

FOUR : CATCH OF THE DAY

You are halfway up the tree, when who should show up but mama grey blue bird! She is alternately attacking you and going down to the ground to act as a decoy to lead you away from the nest. This is the most frequent tactical error that mama birds make.

You sit there, pretending to clean yourself, as though you'd *already* eaten!

And, slowly, you move a bit further down.

At one point, mama bird makes a fatal error. She is *right* below you, and just as she is about to fly, you pounce onto her, teeth into her back, kicking at her with your hindquarters, trying to disembowel her. You decide to play with her a while, instead, chewing on her wings. The left one and then the right one.

The window to your bedroom opens, as well as the curtains. You see Your Lady, and feel a welling, a surge of pride. Look, Lady, See, Mistress, A Birdie For Our Lunch! She comes out with a mallet, and you run away. The Shit who lives with Your Lady likes to take a mallet and kill your catch before you are even properly through playing with it.

She learned this treachery from him. Your mother told you of male treachery before you'd been weaned. And she was right. Mother Seshats are *always* right.

So, apologizing to Your Lady, you run away with your catch. Your Lady goes muttering mumble muttering back into the house. After an interval you get tired of chewing on the right wing and let go, holding her down with your paws, so you can bite into the left wing again. At that moment, the birdie wriggles out of your killing grasp and hip-hops across the lawn, which, though in need of watering, is the color of blood.

Just then, there is a gleam of silver and a noxious oil smell, also a

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chariot noise, announcing the arrival of That Shit, probably returning with *his* Seshat.

You run through the piled detritus of tree needles and cones and dog turds, and catch your birdie. You bite into her back and hold her down.

The Shit comes around the corner, holding the oblong strange cage, which is open. How odd, strange. Did your Nemesis die? You'd feel wholly horrible if that were the case.

From your left peripheral vision, you notice a blur, an approaching something. Suddenly your fat Nemesis is before you. Faker, you knew! All along you knew! Faker!

Acting with speed—the sort of speed you had assumed could never be attained with all that fat to act as inertia—she has pounced on your birdie! The malingering faker's taken your bird!

Furthermore, she's stolen the trophy, torn off the head, causing a stream of blood the color of grass to darken the sidewalk.

She runs off, and hides under the house.

The Shit who brought her back from death's door, all he can do is laugh. *Laugh at you.*

What can you do but take your birdie, what's left of it, and finish it in the neighbor's yard?

That afternoon, catching sun and ants and flies, you consider your options:

There's running away.

There's getting even:

—with Your Nemesis,

—with Your Lady, for giving her tacit approval to this wretched status quo. (After all, Pharoah would have flogged someone for cruelty to Seshats.)

—with That Shit, that Essence of Excrescence who lives with Your Lady, who you might trip as he was about to get into his shiny and gleaming bath, or who you might attack after he started snoring, going for his fluttering testes and hairy eyelids; maybe you could start with small gestures, like pissing on his books or scratching them, or scratching the bookcase, or attacking his favorite wool sweater, and gradually work your way up to a lethal assault,

—Or you could get even with all of them.

You hear a whistle.

To hell with them. For now.

But, wait. That's—

It's Dinner Time!

FOOD!

You run through the historic piles of tree needles, witness to betrayals

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large and small, from time immemorial, from before you were born even, and run back to have some dinner.

FIVE: GOODMORNINGOODMORNIN

Last night, after your dinner, and after their dinner, Your Lady had left, slamming big and little doors, grumbling mumble. Taken the chariot. Left you alone. All alone, with Your Nemesis, and That Shit.

And a long little time later, there was noise at the front door and That Scarab's Delight answered—and it was a lady, not *Your Lady,* either, and they hugged each other, then went into the rooms which should be yours, and you tried to follow. But they shut the door in your face, and you heard them laughing. You backed up to a row of books and pissed on them. They still laughed, from behind the door. So you scratched a wall hanging. Chased Your Nemesis everywhere. Knocked down several of That Shit's things—broke a few. And still they laughed, still he laughed. At you. At Your Lady.

It had been a long, long time before the door opened again, and the other lady left—smelling of sweat and of seed. That Shit went with her. And returned a short time later. When he came back alone, he didn't notice you had destroyed many of his things.

It was when he had again shut the door behind him, shut it in your face, it was then you came to a decision.

You pushed that door and pushed that door, and had been about to give up, when Your Nemesis came and reached up and leaned into the door, and opened it. She'd only wanted Your Lady's desk, good.

You'd heard the familiar rhythm, the ebb and flow of That Shit's snoring. Your mother had taught you about veins, especially those around the neck. You leapt onto the bed, and he turned. For the first time in his life, The Shit was co-operating. You stretched, and flexed, drawing claws from paws. And you pounced.

But that was so long ago, a good night ago, and here it is, a goodmorningoodmornin, and no one left anything in the kitchen for you to snack on.

To think he put up less resistance than mama grey blue bird—but he did bleed more. Much more. Still, he was so easy. You must make a note to only pounce on the sleeping. Yet somehow you had expected more excitement—and that much blood is no fun, not fun at all, it makes your fur the color of grass. Still, you're not a kitten anymore; time to put away a kitten's things.

And too bad some of his bits weren't in any shape to stuff back in

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place. Any Seshat would try, if possible. Pharoah, after all, usually had a criminal's head sewn back on after its removal. But you are Seshat, not Pharoah, you want some kitchen food now. Where could Your Lady be?

You hear a chariot approach, and stop. You hear tiny distant jingling becoming a near jingling, and the door opens. Your Nemesis comes running, demanding food, wet food. Good, it is Your Lady, with another lady, one you vaguely remember. You rush up to her, rub against her, leaving a streak of blood the color of grass. Her friend leans down to stroke your ears, and you playfully bite her. And she laughs.

You hear Your Lady scream and rush back to your room. You are as appalled as she is; you have apparently made some terrible mistake—why else would Your Lady scream like that—isn't it always the Seshat's fault when they scream like that? You rush forward to determine what is wrong, while trying to apologize for whatever rudeness you may have committed. She leaves. Just when you find you've knocked over her plant, she comes back with the mallet. Your Lady has now done something wrong, made the mistake, the silly and stupid grave error. There's no birdie to brain in your room! No birdie at all! ●

—For Sheila Finch

FIRST CONTACT

The people who emerged
look little different than we.
After years of waiting,
deciphering the string of messages
which revealed knowledge
we couldn't synthesize in decades,
we had conceived,
from those binary streams
a race which shimmered and shifted.
Not the same ungainly movements,
quirky speech as we,
who longed so badly
for an otherness to lift us
out of the human sameness
which now seems
so heavy.

—Roger Dutcher

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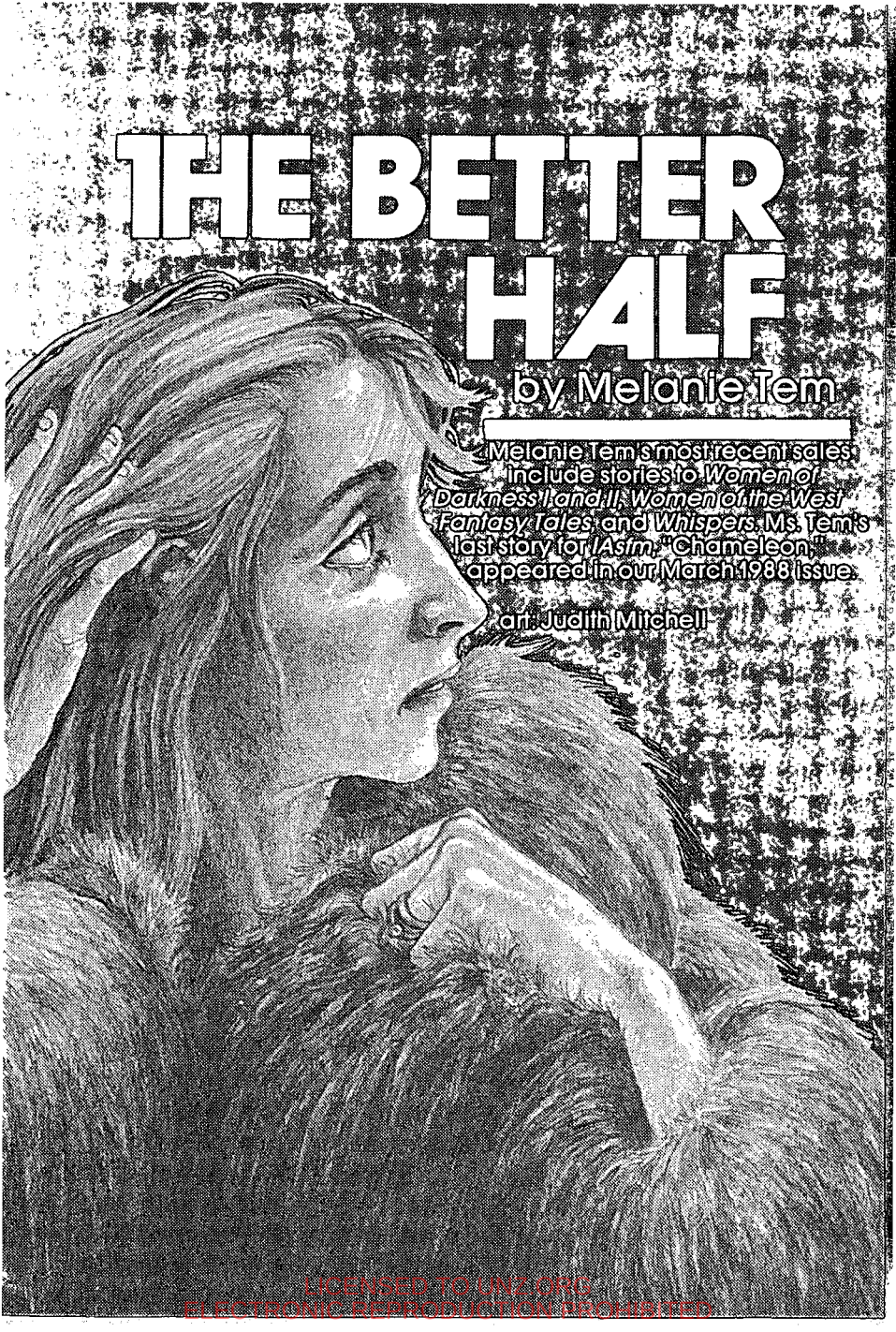
THE BETTER HALF

by Melanie Tem

Melanie Tem's most recent sales include stories to *Women of Darkness I* and *II*, *Women of the West*, *Fantasy Tales*, and *Whispers*. Ms. Tem's last story for *IAsfm*, "Chameleon," appeared in our March 1988 issue.

art: Judith Mitchell



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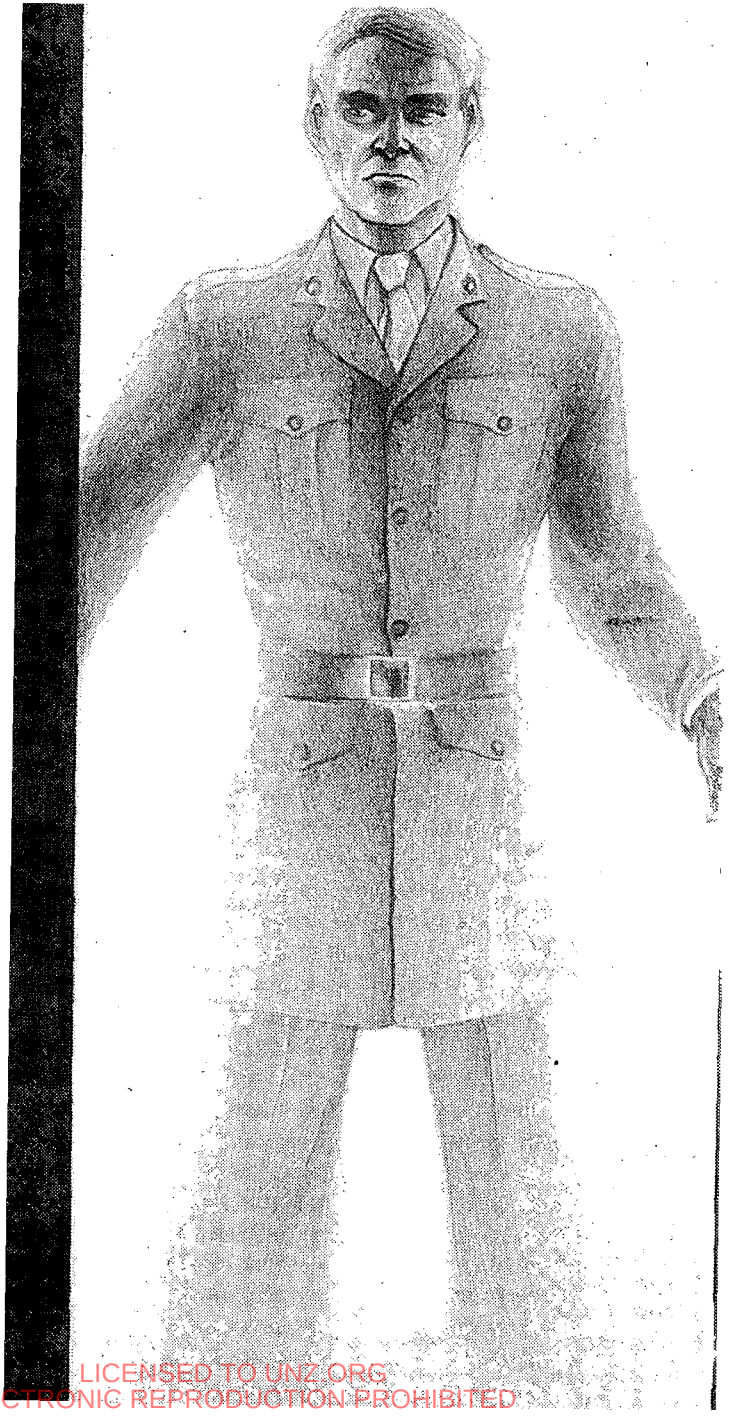

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Kelly opened her front door before I got there. Not wanting her to see me just yet, I stepped partly behind a lilac bush across the street. Its branches were dotted with the hard purplish nubs of their own spent blossoms, and I was aware of a small sadness that I hadn't seen the bush in bloom.

Kelly stepped out onto the porch and shaded her eyes from the high sun. My skirt clung to my thighs; there was no breeze to stir it. The back of my neck itched from the heat. A brown dog in the yard beside me yapped twice, then gave up and went back to its spot in the shade. I noticed the lighter brown of its underbelly, the auburn of its tail fanned out across the khaki-colored grass.

I hadn't seen her in fifteen years, since college. Since her wedding, when I'd watched the ceremony from a gauzy distance, wondering how she could bring herself to do such a thing and whether I'd ever get the chance to do the same. I'd passed through the reception line to have her press my hand and kiss my cheek as though she'd never seen me before, or never would again. Ron had bent to kiss me, too; I'd made a point to cough at his ridiculous aftershave, but he'd cupped my shoulders in his big hands and gazed earnestly down at me. "I love her, Brenda. She really is my better half."

I'd never had another friend as close as Kelly, and that made me a little afraid of her now. Slowly I walked to the corner and waited to cross the street. A delivery truck went by, and in its shiny black surface were blurred reflections of the street, the houses, the shadows and sunshine, even of me if I'd looked fast enough. A man labored up the hill on a bicycle, a pack on his back like a hump.

When I crossed the street Kelly turned and saw me. Green light through the porch awning flooded her face: the same heavy brows, broad cheekbones, slightly aquiline nose. But I thought she looked sick. The spots of color high on her cheeks could have been makeup or fever. She was breathing hard. As I came closer I could see that she was trembling, and that the jacket she wore was fur. It was mid-July and high noon. Sprinklers were flinging rainbows; their moisture evaporated before it could make any real difference in the hot dry air.

Kelly smiled. "Hi, Brenda," she said, without enthusiasm.

The filigreed wrought-iron gate was hot to the touch. I turned to latch it when I'd gone through; maybe there were dogs or small children or something else I should not let out. I walked between neat borders of pinwheel petunias along a sidewalk that curved across the short flat area between the front sidewalk and the porch steps. "Kelly," I said. Not wanting her to hug me, I held out my hand. "It's good to see you."

Her hand was icy cold. She leaned toward me over the porch railing, and a tiny hot breeze stirred the half-dozen windchimes of different

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shapes and sizes that hung from the eave. Plants crowded around her, so healthy and vigorous that they almost obscured her face. I could smell both her honeysuckle perfume and the faint sickly odor of her breath. There were dark circles under her eyes. For a moment I had the disturbing fantasy that she would tumble off the porch into my arms, and that she would weigh no more than the truncated melodies from the chimes.

Her voice seemed much as I remembered it: husky, well-modulated, controlled. But I thought I'd heard it break, as though the three syllables she'd spoken had almost been too much for her. She took a deep ragged breath, encircled my wrist with the thin cold fingers of her other hand, and said, "Come in."

Kelly had always been brilliant. She got Ron through school. Freshman year she actually wrote his papers for him; he was a poli sci major and she took languages, so it meant double studying for her, but she pulled no more all-nighters than the rest of us. Eventually he learned to write first drafts, which she then edited assiduously; you'd see them at a table in the library, Kelly looking grim, Ron looking earnest and genial and bewildered.

She taught him everything. How to write a simple sentence. How to read a paragraph through from beginning to end and catch the drift. How to laugh at the filthy jokes the rest of us told every chance we got, even if he didn't get the punchline. How to behave during rush—at a time when the entire Greek system was the object of much derision on our liberal little campus, Ron became a proud and busy Delt; senior year he was elected chapter president and Kelly, demure in gold chiffon, clung to his arm as if it were a lever.

We gossiped that she taught him everything he knew about sex, too. That first year, before the mores and the rules loosened to allow men and women in each other's rooms, everybody made out in the courtyard of the freshman women's dorm. Because Kelly said they had too much work to do, they weren't there as often as some of the rest of us.

But Ron and Kelly were there often enough for us to observe them and comment on their form. His back would be hard against the wall and his arms stiffly down around her waist. She'd be stretched up to nuzzle in his neck—or, we speculated unkindly, to whisper instructions. At first, if you said hello on your way past—and we would, just to be perverse—Ron's innate politeness would have him nodding and passing the time of day. Kelly didn't acknowledge anything but Ron; as always, she was totally absorbed in what she was doing.

In those days Kelly was already fascinated by women who had died for something they believed in, like Joan of Arc about whom she read

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in lyrical French, or for something they were and couldn't help, like Anne Frank whose diary she read in deceptively robust Dutch. I didn't understand the words—I was a sociology major—but I knew the stories, and I loved the way Kelly looked and sounded when she read. When she stopped, there would be a rapturous silence, and then one or both of us would breathe, "Oh, that was *beautiful!*"

After she met Ron, things changed between Kelly and me. At first, all she talked about was him, and I understood that; I talked about my boyfriends a lot, too. But gradually she quit talking to me at all, and when she listened it was politely, her pen poised over the essay whose editing I had interrupted.

"What is it between you and Ron anyway?" I demanded abruptly one night when we'd been trying unsuccessfully to study over the rising noise of the party down the hall. "Role-reversed Pygmalion, or what?"

She was silent for such a long time that I thought either she'd fallen asleep or she was completely ignoring me. I was just about to pose my challenge again, maybe even get out of bed and shake her until she paid attention to me, when she answered calmly. "There are worse things."

"Kelly, you're beautiful and brilliant. You could have any man on this campus. Ron is just so *ordinary*."

"Ron is good for me, Brenda. I don't expect you to understand." But then she assuaged my hurt feelings by trying to explain. "He takes me out of myself."

That was the last time Kelly and I talked about anything important. It was practically the last time we talked at all. For the rest of freshman year I might have had a single room, except for intimate, hurtful evidence of her—stockings hung like empty skin on the closet doorknob to dry, bottles of perfume and makeup like a string of amulets across her night-stand—all of it carefully on her side of the room. The next year she roomed with a sorority sister, a young woman whose hairdo looked so much like a mushroom that they all called her "Mush." I barely knew the girl; I never even knew her real name. I didn't think Kelly ever knew her very well either.

Kelly's house was orderly and close and clean. The tiny entryway was lit only by one small, high, vine-covered window. Kelly walked haltingly ahead of me.

She led me into the living room, where a fire crackled in a plain brick fireplace and not a speck of ash marred the rose-tone surface of the hearth. Heavy drapes, maroon or chocolate brown, were pulled shut from floor to ceiling, and all the lights were on. The room was stifling. Kelly pulled the fur jacket more tightly around her. Confused, my senses askew, I hesitated in the doorway.

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"We haven't lived here very long." She was apologizing, but I didn't know why.

"It's nice," I said lamely, and followed her into the nightlike, winterlike room.

She gestured. "Make yourself at home."

I sat down. In a matter of seconds, the parts of my body that faced the fire grew uncomfortably warm, and I had started to sweat. Kelly huddled on an ottoman that she'd pulled almost onto the hearth, hugging her knees and shivering.

I was discomfited by the silence between us, through which I could hear her labored breathing and the spitting of the fire. To have something to say, I asked her, "How long have you lived here?"

"Just a few months. Since the first of April." So she was aware that it was summer.

"And how long will you be here?" I knew it was sounding like an interrogation, but I was desperate for some grounding in time and space. The heat was making my head spin.

"Ron says he thinks we'll be here for a long time. We're all tired of moving. He says he'd only accept a transfer if it meant a big promotion."

Absently she picked two bits of lint off the carpet, which had looked spotless to me, and deposited them into her other palm. When she closed her fingers protectively around the minute debris, I noticed that her silver-pink nails were bitten to the quick. She wore opaque mauve stockings thicker than standard nylons, and fur-lined boots nearly to her knees. I had an odd impulse to go sit by her, ask her to hug me to warm us both, although I was sweating profusely.

"So tell me about your life since college," I said, somewhat urgently in the pressing silence.

"Well, Ron's a major in the Air Force. And he's an attorney specializing in international affairs."

"You're kidding," I said, before I could stop myself.

She smiled wanly. "Nobody from college would believe it, would they? You all thought he was stupid."

"And what about you?"

"We have two sons. Joshua is five and Clay is nine."

"I had a little girl," I found myself saying. "She died when she was almost four. They said she'd been sick since she was born. Maybe before she was born. I didn't know. My husband left after she died. You remember Derek." But she wouldn't, I realized. I hadn't met Derek in college.

Kelly's pale face grew paler. "I'm so sorry, Brenda."

I could have told her more about Annie, or about Derek who had just decided he didn't want to be married anymore. Or about the other man

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I'd loved who had a few weeks ago given up on his dream of eliminating world hunger, married someone I'd never heard of, and moved to a hamlet on the other side of the mountains to run a souvenir shop. Or about my work in various of those fields known as "the helping professions," with thousands of clients whose mental illness or personal idiosyncracy prevented them from recognizing their desperate need for someone like me—who, in fact, often hardly recognized me from one day to the next. Instead, I said, "I enjoyed Ron's Christmas letter last year."

She looked mildly surprised. "Oh, I didn't know we sent one."

"It was great. He described some of the places you've lived in Europe, your travels in the Alps. He writes very well now."

In fact, the letter had been so eloquent and interesting and grammatically sophisticated that I'd convinced myself, with self-serving distaste, that Kelly was still ghost-writing. It was both unnerving and, for some reason, exciting to discover that she'd had nothing to do with it.

"He talked a lot about the boys. It sounds like they keep you busy."

"Sometimes I don't know how we keep up." She laughed weakly.

"He said none of it would be possible without you. He said you hold this family together."

"How sweet." She was not being sarcastic. She wiped away tears.

"He—said you'd been sick." I found myself oddly hesitant to inquire about her health, although it was so obviously a subject worth note.

She passed a thin hand over thin hair. "Yes, well, I guess the climate in northern Europe just didn't agree with me. Those gray, wet winters."

"Still keeping up with your languages?"

"Just the one of whatever country I'm living in. I'd practically forgotten English before we came back home."

At that moment, Kelly's sons came home. The slam of the back screen door seemed to make the little house flinch; the high-pitched voices tore at the cloaked atmosphere of the room, and I found myself shivering.

Struggling to stay in focus, I kept my eyes on Kelly. The transformation was remarkable. Many times after that I saw it happen to her, but that first time it took my breath away.

At the first evidence that her children were in the house, Kelly began to fill out like an inflatable doll. Color flooded into her cheeks. Her shoulders squared and she sat up straight. By the time the boys found us and rushed into the living room, she was holding out her arms to them, and the white fur jacket had slipped from her shoulders onto the hearth, where I was afraid it would burn.

"Mommy, Mommy, take me to Jason's house!"

"No! I want you to watch me on the trampoline *right now!*"

"I hurt myself today, see? Put a Band-Aid on!"

"Michael's spending the night tonight. We want pizza."

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"I have a Scout meeting in *half an hour,* Mom, and you *promised* you'd get all those badges sewed on!"

"I'm *hungry!*"

If I hadn't been staring at them, I'd have been sure that there were more than two children. My daughter Annie had been sweet and shy, her voice seldom much above a whisper; you had to ask her if she was hungry, if she hurt, if she needed anything. I hardly knew what to say to these boys when Kelly introduced us; they said almost nothing to me, barely acknowledged my presence, immediately turned their eyes and their voices back to their mother with all the things they needed.

Steadily Kelly took care of all those things, one by one. She made promises, set schedules, kissed hurt fingers. She was good at this; it didn't take long. But by the time the boys went racing out of the room, I was exhausted, and Kelly had visibly collapsed in on herself again, her face drawn, her hands shaking, the fur jacket wrapped tightly around as much of her body as it would cover.

"You have a nice family." I managed to say.

She nodded and smiled wanly.

"They don't seem to like me much," I ventured, feeling a little foolish to be saying that about children I'd just met.

"They will," she said. "They're a little leery of strangers, but once they get to know you, you won't be able to keep them off you."

I stayed longer that first day than I'd intended. When Kelly told the boys that I was an old friend from college, Joshua stared at me solemn-eyed from across the room and demanded, "Do you know my daddy, too?" I said that I did, or used to, wondering what in his mind I was admitting to.

We had a picnic lunch on the patio. The kids splashed in the sprinkler, bounced on the backyard trampoline. A nervous hostess, Kelly fluttered and fussed to make sure the boys and I were served, persistently inquired whether the lemonade was sweet enough and whether there was too much mayonnaise on the sandwiches, was visibly worried whenever any of us paused in our eating. She herself didn't eat at all. She just watched us eat and play, and the look on her face was near panic.

Restless under Kelly's fretful scrutiny, I joined the boys. I tossed the dusty yellow frisbee, spotted Clay on the tramp, squirted Josh with the hose. I was clumsy in my play and they didn't like it. "Quit!" Josh shrieked when the water hit him, and Clay simply slid off the tramp and stalked away.

I was determined to make friends with these children, to find something that would win them over. I wandered around the yard. Red and salmon roses climbed the privacy fence; I touched their petals and thorns, bent to sniff their fragrance. "Ron likes roses," Kelly said from behind

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me, and I jumped; I hadn't realized how close she was. "They're a lot of care, though. Ron buys me books."

"They're beautiful," I said. A thorn pricked my fingertip; its rose was the color of my blood. Clay appeared at my elbow, carrying a framed and glass-covered family portrait big enough that he had to hold it with both hands.

"Clay," his mother reproved him. "You shouldn't be carrying that around."

"I'll put it back," he said lightly, dismissing her. "See," he said earnestly to me. "That's my dad."

I didn't know what to say, what acknowledgement would be satisfactory. I looked at him, at his brother across the yard, at the portrait. It had been taken several years ago; the boys looked much younger. Kelly was pale and lovely, leaning against her husband although the photographer had doubtless posed her upright. The uniformed man at the hub of the family grouping was taller, ruddier, and possessed of much more presence than I remembered. "You look like him," I finally said to Clay. "You both do." He grinned and nodded and took the heavy picture back into the house.

I sat on the kids' swing and watched a gray bird sitting in the apple tree, idly wondering whether Kelly made applesauce, whether Ron and the boys liked apple pie. "My dad put up those swings for us!" Joshua shouted angrily from the wading pool. I took the lemonade pitcher inside for more ice, although no one had suggested it.

Being alone in Kelly's kitchen gave me a sense of just-missed intimacy. I guessed that she spent considerable time in here, cooking and cleaning, but there seemed to be nothing personal about her in the room. The pictures on the wall above the microwave were standard, square, factory-painted representations of vegetables, a tomato and a carrot and an ear of corn, pleasant enough. On the single-shelf spice rack above the dishwasher were two red-and-white cans and two undistinguished glass bottles: cinnamon, onion powder, salt, and pepper. Nothing idiosyncratic or identifying. No dishes soaked in the sink; no meat was thawing on the counter for dinner.

I remember thinking that, if I looked through the cupboards and drawers and into the back shelves of the refrigerator, I'd surely find something about Kelly, but I couldn't quite bring myself to make such a deliberate search. Now, of course, I know that in the freezer I'd have found fudgsicles for Clay and Eskimo Pies for Josh, and no doubt a six-pack of Coors Lite on the top shelf of the refrigerator for Ron. But, no matter how deeply I looked or how broadly I'd interpreted, I wouldn't have found anything personal about Kelly, except in what she'd made sure was there for the

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others. No favorite snacks of hers secreted away, no special recipes, no bottle of cooking wine behind the glasses for clandestine sipping.

I set the pitcher on the counter and moved to the middle of the floor. I closed my eyes and held my breath. It was like being trapped in a flotation tank. I could hear the boys squealing and shouting outside, the hum of a lawnmower farther away and the ticking of a clock nearby, but the sounds were outside of me, not touching. I could smell layers of homey kitchen odors—coffee, cinnamon, onions—but I had never been fed in this room.

I opened my eyes and was dizzy. Without knowing it, I had turned, so that now I was facing a little alcove that opened off the main kitchen. A breakfast nook, maybe, or a pantry. I went around the multicolored Plexiglas partition and gasped.

The place was a shrine. On all three walls, from the waist-high wainscoting nearly to the ceiling, were photographs of Ron and Clay and Joshua. Black-and-white photos on a plain white background, unlike the busy kitchen wallpaper in the rest of the room. Pictures of them singly and in various combinations: Ron in uniform, looking stoic and sensible; Clay doing a back flip on the trampoline; Joshua in his Cub Scout uniform; the three of them in a formal pose, each boy with his hand on his father's shoulder; the boys by a Christmas tree. I counted; there were forty-three photographs.

I couldn't bring myself actually to go into the alcove. I think I was afraid I'd hear voices. And there was not a single likeness of Kelly anywhere on the open white walls.

Later, a grim and wonderful thought occurred to me: it would have been virtually impossible for a detective to find out anything useful about Kelly. Or for a voodoo practitioner to fashion an efficacious doll. There was little essence of her left. There were few details. By the end, it would have been easy to say that she had no soul.

For the rest of that summer and into the fall, I spent most of my free time at Kelly's. At first it was lunch on Saturdays with her and the boys: sandwiches on the patio, hamburgers or hot dogs barbecued on the grill, pizza from Carl's that the boys ordered without telling us and then paid for with money their mother gave them from her purse. Ron would be home soon, she said resignedly, and would give her more spending money.

She never let me bring anything, and seemed to take offense when I tried to insist. One Friday night I baked brownies, the first time I'd baked since Annie's death, and carried them to Kelly's the next morning wrapped in foil like a gift. The boys loved them; Joshua ate six. Though she beamed indulgently at him and seemed to take pleasure from her sons' pleasure, Kelly's face when she looked at me or at the brownies

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was rigid with what I took to be anger. I was so happy to be there that I didn't ask what was wrong.

The boys got used to me and I to them. They began to come to me sometimes; they needed so many things that both their mother and I were kept busy. Joshua let me tend to a scraped knee, his eyes wide with horror and fascination as the disinfectant bubbled around the wound. In August I went with Clay on a Scout hike; Kelly had seemed willing for me to substitute, but, as the chattering Clay ushered me out the door, she was hugging herself frantically and her face was blank.

"Kelly," I'd say to her. "Why don't you and I go somewhere for lunch? You could take the boys to the pool."

"The pool isn't safe. I don't like the kind of kids who go there."

"Get a sitter, then. Just for a couple of hours."

"I don't know anybody to ask. Besides, my place is home, with them."

"It's nice to see a mother spend so much time with her kids," I lied, trying to understand, trying to get her to talk to me about something.

"We've always been—close," she said, a little hesitantly. "Both of them nursed until they were almost two. Sometimes Josh still will nip at my breast. In play, you know."

Somewhat taken aback, I managed to say, "You really seem to enjoy their company." But "enjoy" wasn't the right word; Kelly's animation when she was with her children was almost grim.

She shrugged and laughed briefly, a pallid sound. "I guess I really only feel alive when I'm with my family. I take care of them and I'm good at anticipating their needs, and I forget about myself." She laughed again, then pressed a fist against her mouth as though to fight down nausea. "But when they're away I realize how *tired* I am. They drain me. They take everything I've got." She closed her eyes and swayed in her chair; alarmed, I reached toward her, but she steadied herself.

I was worried about Kelly and sad for her. I was also increasingly annoyed that she didn't seem to appreciate what she had. The more time I spent at her house, the more lonely and pointless my own life seemed. Nobody needed me. Nobody made me see who I was.

"Kelly," I tried, "come with me to the movies. There's one in town I've been wanting to see, and it'll be leaving soon, and I don't want to go alone."

"I don't like movies anymore," she told me. "The theaters are always so *cold,* and most of the time I have trouble following the plot." Her eyes brightened for a moment. "But the boys have been wanting to see that new horror movie, and Ron won't have time. Why don't you take them?"

I agreed happily and waved away her offer to pay for our tickets. "My treat," I insisted. Then, though I couldn't have explained it, I wasn't

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surprised to watch her eyes glaze and her face slacken—in fatigue, I surmised, or jealousy, or grief.

I'd never taken children to the movies before; Annie had always been too young and too sick. I watched in amazement as Clay and Joshua cavorted around the lobby, banging on the video machines and whooping, darting among people in the refreshment line, racing each other up the stairs to the restroom and down again. My efforts to control them were clumsy and halfhearted; their energy and noise made me laugh, and I really didn't want them to stop. People stared at us disapprovingly, and one woman said loudly to her companion that people who didn't know how to be parents shouldn't have kids.

It crossed my mind to protest publicly that these weren't my kids, that I was only babysitting for a friend, that I wasn't responsible for their behavior. But I found myself unwilling to acknowledge any of that. When I grabbed Clay's shoulder or held Josh's hand, when I called to them sharply or whispered gentle admonitions in their ears, I felt a part of their lives, and I loved it. By the time the three of us were finally settled in our seats and the lights went down, I was exhausted, but I was also exhilarated. Fleetingly I thought about Kelly at home alone in that dark and stifling house, and reminded myself that she had sent me here, that there was no reason for me to feel guilty about usurping her place. Then Joshua was clamoring to trade seats with Clay because someone tall had sat down in front of him, and in the commotion I was able to forget all about Kelly.

About halfway through the movie, when the man with the knife had already jumped out of the closet twice and the camera was now blatantly focusing on the closet door again, I felt Josh tugging at my sleeve. The music rose. The teenagers behind us were tittering nervously. In the flashing light from the screen I could see from Clay's profile that he was doing his best to look bored, although he was gripping the armrest hard. I leaned close to Josh. "I'm *scared!*" he whispered.

I panicked slightly. "What do you want to do?"

"My mom lets me sit in her lap when I get scared."

I hesitated. My heart was racing. Drums rolled all around us in Dolby sound. I hadn't held a child in my lap since Annie, and Annie had died. "Okay," I whispered finally. "Come on."

He clambered into my lap and curled up there, his fists to his mouth like a much younger child. When the man leaped out of the closet and came leering toward the camera with the knife raised and gleaming, Joshua turned and buried his face in my breast. He pushed himself so hard against me that for a moment I couldn't catch my breath. I held him tightly. Clay leaned against my shoulder. We sat like that for the

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rest of the movie and when it was over the three of us were, I think, a little sorry and a little reluctant to go home.

Summer ended. I still hadn't seen Ron. He was always away when I was there, at the office, or traveling on undisclosed official business, or teaching at an impressive-sounding conference somewhere. But his presence in the house and in the family was powerful; scarcely an hour ever went by without somebody mentioning his name, quoting a witticism or an observation, pointing out some object he'd made, reminding the rest of us of some instructions he'd left.

I, of course, had none of these personal little attachments to Ron, and that bothered me. For a while, I fantasized about dropping by the house early in the morning on my way to work, on the chance he wouldn't have left yet, or after midnight when I couldn't sleep and had gone out for cigarettes, hoping to catch him awake. I even thought about trying to find his office and taking him to lunch. Instead, I paid close attention to what the others knew about him, and tried to absorb what I could.

Kelly's roses faded; marigolds and then chrysanthemums came into their own. The apple tree bore nicely, small fruit clustered all on the south side of the tree because, Kelly speculated with her eyes filled with tears, the blossoms on the north side had frozen in the spring snowstorm. The boys went back to school.

"Now you have lots of free time. Let's go to the art museum some morning next week. I can take a few hours off."

"Oh, Brenda, the work around here is piling up. I haven't even started fall housecleaning. I'm redecorating Clay's room, and there must be a dozen layers of wallpaper on those walls. I want to get started on Christmas; Ron wants me to make gifts this year. My first responsibility is to my family. You're welcome to come here, though. I could fix you brunch."

One crisp Wednesday in late September, I had an eleven o'clock meeting over on her side of town and didn't have to be back in the office until the two o'clock staff meeting. Impulsively, I turned off onto a side street toward her house.

I had never dropped in on Kelly unexpectedly before. It made me nervous. I felt a bit feverish, chilled, though the sun was warm and the sky brilliant. These old blocks had the sharp-edged quality that autumn sometimes imparts to a cityscape: every brick seemed outlined, every flower and leaf a jewel.

I parked at the side of her house, across the street. I opened and shut the gate as quietly as I could. I stood on her porch for a while, listening to the windchimes, catching stray rainbows from the lopsided cellophane leaf Josh had made in school and taped in the front window. She had moved the plants inside for the winter, and the porch seemed bare. Fi-

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nally I pushed the button for the doorbell and waited. A few cars went by behind me. I pressed the button again.

Hearing no response, I tried the door and it opened easily. Once inside, I shut the door quickly behind me, thinking to keep out the light and the dust. I was nearly through the foyer and into the kitchen before I called her name.

"In here, Brenda," she answered, as if she'd been expecting me. I stopped for a moment, bewildered; maybe I'd somehow forgotten that I'd called ahead, or maybe we'd had plans for today that I hadn't written in my appointment book.

"Where?"

"In here."

I found her, finally, in the master bedroom, in bed. She wore a scarf and a stocking cap on her head, mittens on the hands that pulled the covers up to her chin. Around her neck I could see the collar of the white fur jacket. Her teeth were chattering, and her skin was so pale that it was almost green. I stood in the doorway and stared. The shaft of light through the blinded windows looked wintry. "Kelly, what's wrong? Are you sick?" It was a question I could have asked months before.

"I'm *cold*," she said weakly. "I just don't seem to have any—energy."

"Should I call somebody?"

"No, it's all right. Usually if I can stay in bed all day I'm all right by the time the boys get home from school."

"How often does this happen?"

"Oh, I don't know. Every other day or so now, I guess."

I had advanced into the room until I was standing by the side of the bed, but I was reluctant to touch her. "Where's Ron?" I demanded. "Is he still out of town? Does he know about this?"

"He came home last night," she told me.

"What shall I do? Should I call him at work? Or call a doctor?"

"No." With a great sigh and much tremulous effort, she lifted her feet over the side of the bed and sat up. She swayed; I put my hand flat against the wall and lowered my head to let it clear. Kelly stood up. "Take me out somewhere to lunch," she said. "I'm hungry."

Without my help, she made it out of the house, down the walk, and into the car. Sun had been shining in the passenger window, so it would be warm for her there; there was definitely a fall chill in the air.

"Where do you want to go?" I asked her.

"Someplace fast."

We were five minutes from half a dozen fast food places. Kelly said she had no preference, so I drove somewhat randomly to one whose parking lot wasn't too crowded, since she wanted to go inside.

The place was bright, warm, cacophonous. I saw Kelly wrap herself

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more snugly in the fur jacket, saw a few people glance at her and then glance away. She went to find a seat, as far as she could get from the drafts through windows and doors, and I ordered for both of us, not knowing what she would want, taking a chance. The line was astonishingly long. When I finally got to her, she was staring with a stricken look on her face at the middle-aged woman in the ridiculous uniform who was clearing the tables and sweeping the floor. "I talked to her," Kelly whispered as I set the laden tray down. "She has a master's degree."

"In what?" It seemed wise to keep her engaged, though I didn't know what she was talking about. "Here's your shake. I hope chocolate's all right."

When she didn't answer, I looked at her more closely. Her expression of abject horror made my stomach turn. Her eyes were bloodshot and bulging. She was breathing heavily through her twisted mouth. Her gloved hands on the tabletop were clawed, as if trying to find in the formica something to cling to. "That could be me a few years from now."

"Don't be silly," I snapped. "You have a lot more going for you than that woman does."

She stared at me. "You don't understand," she whispered hoarsely, "but you will." Then, to my own horror, she struggled to her feet and hobbled out the door. For a moment I really thought she'd disappeared, vanished somehow into the air that wasn't much thinner than she was.

The lunchtime crowd had filled in behind Kelly and was all of a piece again. I pushed through it and through the door, which framed the busy street scene as though it were a poor photograph, flat and meaningless to me until I entered it. Kelly had collapsed on the hot sidewalk against the building. Her knees were drawn up, and her head was down so that the stringy dark hair fell into her face. I hurried to her side before anyone else could get there.

I met Ron at the hospital. From the ambulance stretcher, in a flat high voice like the siren, Kelly had told me how to reach him. It took long minutes to work my way through all the layers and synapses of the bureaucracy he worked in. His voice sounded very official on the other end of the line.

They had just taken Kelly to be examined when he got there. I was standing at the counter looking after her, feeling bereft; they wouldn't let me go back behind the curtain with her, and she was too weak to ask for me. When the tall blond uniformed man strode by me, I didn't try to speak to him, and no one else did either. He was her husband. She was part of him. He had the right.

I felt Ron's presence approaching me before I opened my eyes and saw

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him. "She's unconscious," he said. "They don't know yet what's wrong. You don't look very good yourself. Come and sit down."

I didn't let him touch me then, but I preceded him to a pair of orange plastic bucket chairs bolted side-by-side to a metal bar against the wall. I didn't make the effort to face him. He was friendly and solemn, as befitted the occasion. He took my hand in both of his, swallowing it. "Brenda," he said; he made my name sound far more significant than I'd ever thought it was, and—despite myself, despite the circumstances, despite what I'd have mistakenly called my better judgment—something inside me stirred gratefully. "It's nice to see you again after all these years. I'm sorry our reunion turned out to be like this. Kelly's talked a lot about you lately."

I nodded. I didn't know what to say.

"What happened?" Ron asked. He let go of my hand and it was cold. I put both hands in my pockets.

"She—collapsed."

"Tell me what happened. The details." He was moving in, assuming command. It crossed my mind to resist him, but I wouldn't have known how.

"I dropped by to see her. I was in the neighborhood. When I got there she was sick. She asked me to take her out to lunch. So we—"

"Out?" His blond eyebrows rose and then furrowed. "Out of the house? With you?"

I mustered a little indignation. "What's wrong with that?"

"It's unusual, that's all. Go on."

I told him the rest of what I knew. It seemed to take an enormous amount of time to say it all, though I wouldn't have thought I had that much to say. I stumbled over words. There were long silences. Ron listened attentively. At one point he rested his hand on my shoulder in a comradely way, and I was too tired and disoriented to pull away. When I finished, he nodded, and then someone came for him from behind the curtains and lights, and I was left alone again, knowing I hadn't said enough.

I wasn't there when Kelly died. Sometimes I wonder what she'd have said to me if she could. When Ron called to tell me she was gone, he woke me from a troubled sleep. "Oh, Ron," I said, and then waited groggily for him to tell me what to do.

It seemed like a very long time before he said raggedly, "I'd like you to come over. The boys are having a rough time."

I went right away, and I haven't left since. I haven't even been back to my apartment to pack up my things; none of my former possessions seems worth retrieval now. I had no pets to feed, no plants to water, no

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books or clothes or furniture or photographs that mean anything to me anymore.

Kelly had kept the house so orderly that I had no trouble finding things. The boys' schedules are predictable, though very busy; on a laminated list on the kitchen bulletin board are names and phone numbers of their friends, Scout leaders, piano teachers. Menus had been planned for weeks in advance and taped to the refrigerator door; I've inserted a few of my own variations, but not many.

In Kelly's half of the closet in the master bedroom, I found clothes of various sizes, and the larger ones, from before she lost weight, fit me fine. On the bathroom shelves she'd stocked supplies of generic shampoos and conditioners and hand soaps; in the medicine cabinet was makeup —shades too light for my coloring, actually, but I've been using it rather than go out and buy more, and Ron says it looks fine.

The first week, I took personal leave from work. Since then I've called in sick, when I think of it; of course, they don't know where I am.

Ron is away a good deal. The work he does is important and mysterious; I can't hope to really understand what it is, but I'm proud to be able to help him do it. The boys keep me busy. Clay is having trouble with long division in school, and every night we spend hours together on homework. He hates it, and sometimes he hates me for making him do it, but it's important and he'll thank me for it later.

Ron stayed home that first week and we got to know each other. "You're very different from the man I knew in college," I told him one night. We were sitting in the darkened living room after the boys had gone to bed, talking about Kelly.

He nodded and smiled slightly. "Kelly used to say that I'd developed my potential beyond her wildest dreams," he admitted, "and she'd lost hers."

I felt a flash of anger against her, although she'd been my friend and she was dead. "She had choices," I pointed out.

"At first, maybe."

"She could have done other things with her life."

"Sometimes," he observed quietly, "once you make one choice you lose control over what follows." He covered his face with his hands. "I don't know how I'm going to manage without her. She was—*everything* to me and to my sons."

At that moment, he sounded so much like the good-hearted, slow-witted innocent I'd known years before that I put my arms around him. "I'm here now," I murmured. "I can take care of you."

He turned to me hesitantly, as if he didn't know what to do. I kissed him. After a moment he responded, his tongue in my mouth, and I could hardly breathe. His teeth along my lip drew blood. I put his hands to my

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breasts; his caress was awkward. It quickly became so fierce that it hurt, but I didn't want him to stop. He bit at my neck, sucked at my nipples, tangled his hands in my hair, and when at last he was inside me it was as if, somehow, I emptied myself into him, lost myself in the spaces of his body and his mind and his desperate words in my ear.

Afterwards, I held him and we lay together for awhile. I remember feeling curiously empty and full at the same time. I remember thinking that it would have been nice to have had a fire in the fireplace; Kelly would have thought to start a fire. I remember that that first night, that first time, I did not feel tired or cold; the sickness has since begun, its first small signs, but the exhilaration has heightened, too.

Ron says he loves me. He says that he and the boys need me now, couldn't live without me. I like to hear that, and I know that it's true. ●

REPORT

Kindly mention
the small of her back
lapped
covered with
She thought
in the black silt
supple and glossy
fallen leaves.

she slept
to his groin,
as with tongues
green woolly
to absorb
but he gave her
as yellow

with the Water King,
his carefully folded ears
by soft water
October pond scum.
his growing power
only
leather gloves

—Mary A. Turzillo

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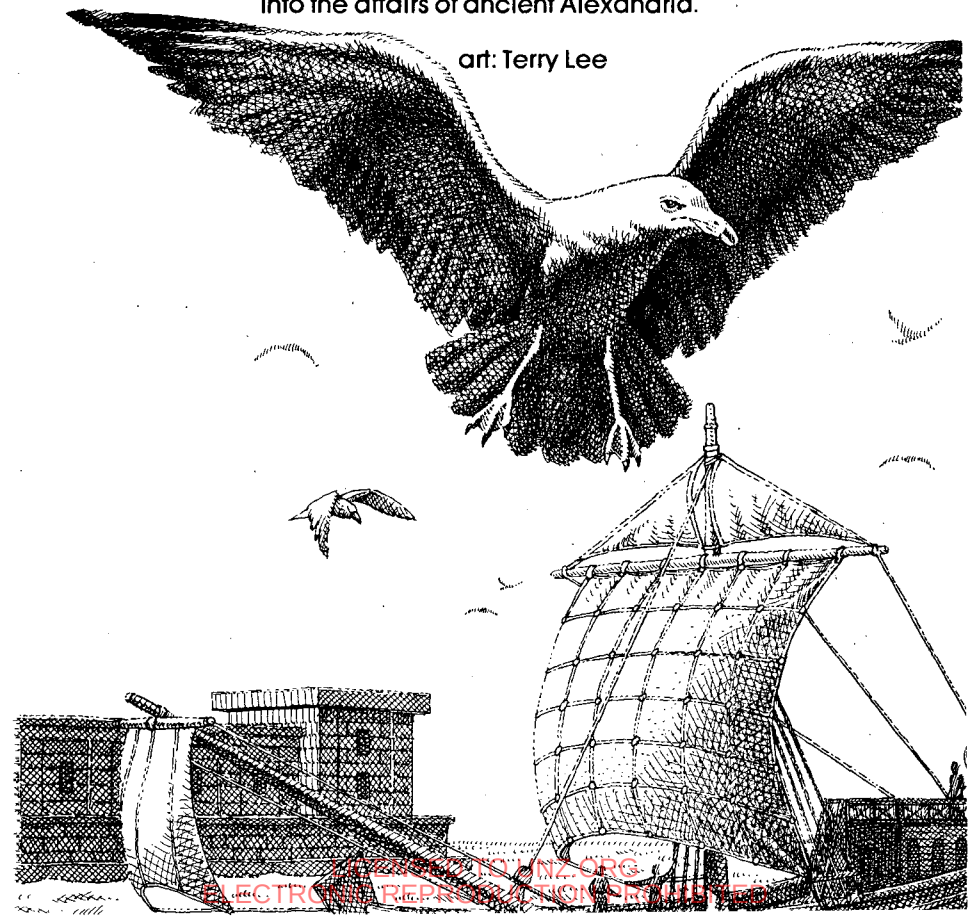
PILLAR OF CLOUD, PILLAR OF FIRE

by Harry Turtledove

Harry Turtledove's newest tale about the adventures of Basil Argyros sends his brilliant Byzantine magistrianos on a complicated investigation into the affairs of ancient Alexandria.

art: Terry Lee



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Basil Argyros' shadow was only a small black puddle on the deck timbers under his feet. The sun stood almost at the zenith, higher in the sky than he had ever known it. He used the palm of his hand to shield his eyes from its fierce glare as he peered southwards past the ship's bowsprit. The blue waters of the Middle Sea stretched unbroken before him.

He turned to a sailor hurrying past. "Did the captain not say we'd likely spot land today?"

The sailor, a lean, sun-toasted man who wore only loincloth and sandals, gave a wry chuckle. "Likely's not certain, sir, and today's not done." His Greek had a strong, hissing Egyptian accent—he was heading home.

Argyros wanted to ask another question, but the fellow had not paused to wait for it. He had work to keep him busy; aboard ship, passengers had little better to do than stand around, talk, and gamble—Argyros was up a couple of gold nomismata for the trip. Even so, he had been bored more often than not.

He remembered a time when he would have relished the chance to spend a week or so just thinking. Those were the days before his wife and infant son had died in the smallpox epidemic at Constantinople two years ago. Now when his mind was idle, it kept drifting back to them. He peered south again, hoping the pretense of purpose would hold memory at bay. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't. Today it didn't, not very well.

Still, getting away from the imperial capital helped give distance to his sorrow. That was why he had volunteered to go to Alexandria. His fellow magistrianoi looked at him as if they thought he was mad. Likely they did. Anything that had to do with Egypt meant trouble.

Right now, though, Argyros relished trouble, the more, the better. A troubled present would keep him too occupied to think back to his anguished past. He could—

A shout from the port rail snapped him out of his reverie. "The pharos!" cried a passenger, obviously another man with time on his hands. "I see the stub of the pharos!" His arm stabbed out.

Argyros hurried to join him, looked in the direction he was pointing. Sure enough, he saw a white tower thrusting itself up past the smooth sea horizon. The magistrianos shook his head in chagrin. "I would have spied it before if I'd looked southeast instead of due south," he said.

The man beside him laughed. "This must be your first trip across the open ocean, if you think we can sail straight to where we're going. I count us lucky to have come so close. We won't have to put in at some village to ask where we are, and risk being pirated."

"If the pharos were fully rebuilt, its beacon-fire and the smoke from it could be spied a day's sail away," Argyros said. " 'And the Lord went

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before them by day in a pillar of cloud, to lead them the way; and by night in a pillar of fire, to give them light; to go by day and night.' "

He and the other man both crossed themselves at the Biblical quotation. So did the sailor with whom Argyros had spoke before. He said, "Sirs, captains have been petitioning emperors to get the pharos rebuilt since the earthquake knocked it down a lifetime ago. They're only now getting round to it." He spat over the rail to show what he thought of the workings of the Roman Empire's bureaucracy.

Argyros, who was part of that bureaucracy, understood and sympathized with the sailor's feelings. Magistrianoi—secret investigators, agents, sometimes spies—could not grow hidebound, not if they wanted to live to grow old. But officials with lawbooks had governed the Empire from Constantinople for almost a thousand years. No wonder they often moved slow as flowing pitch. The wonder, sometimes, was that they moved at all.

The man who had first seen the pharos said, "Seems to me the blasted Egyptians are more to blame for all the delays than his majesty Nikephoros." He turned to Argyros for support. "Don't you think so, sir?"

"I know little of such things," the magistrianos said mildly. He shifted to Latin, a tongue still used in the Empire's western provinces but hardly ever heard in Egypt. "Do you understand this speech?"

"A little. Why?" the passenger asked. The sailor, not following, shook his head.

"Because I can use it to remind you it might not be wise to revile Egyptians when the crew of this ship is nothing else but."

The man blinked, then gave a startled nod. If the sailor had been offended, he got no chance to do anything about it. Just then, the captain shouted for him to help shift the lines to the foresail as the ship swung toward Alexandria. "As well we're west of the city," Argyros observed. "The run into the merchantmen's harbor will be easier than if we had to sail round the island of Pharos."

"So it will," the other passenger nodded. Then he paused, took a long look at the magistrianos. "For someone who says he knows little of Alexandria, you're well-informed."

Argyros shrugged, annoyed with himself for slipping. It might not matter now, but could prove disastrous if he did it at the wrong time. He did know more of Alexandria than he had let on—he knew as much as anyone could who had never come there before. Research seemed a more profitable way to spend his time than mourning.

He even knew why the pharos was being restored so slowly despite Nikephoros' interest in having it shine once more. That was why he had come. Knowing what to do about the problem was something else again. No one in Alexandria seemed to. That, too, was why he'd been sent.

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The ship glided into the harbor of Eunostos—Happy Return. The island of Pharos (from which the famous lighthouse drew its name) shielded the harbor from storms out of the north, while the Heptastadion, the seven-furlong causeway from the mainland to Pharos, divided it from the Great Harbor to the east. The Great Harbor was reserved for warships.

The Heptastadion was not quite what Argyros had expected. He'd not thought to ask much about it, and the ancient authors who wrote of it termed it an embankment. So it had been, in their time. But centuries of accumulating silt had made it into an isthmus almost a quarter mile wide. Houses and shops and manufactories stood alongside the elevated roadway to the island. The magistrianos' frown drew his heavy eyebrows—eyebrow, really, for the hair grew together above his nose—down over his deep-set eyes. He wondered what else he would find that was not in those books.

Ships and boats of all types and sizes filled the harbor of Eunostos: tubby square-rigged merchantmen like the one on which Argyros traveled, fishing-boats with short-luffed lugsails that let them sail closer to the wind, many-oared tugs. Two of those strode spiderlike across the water to Argyros' vessel as it neared the harbor's granite quays.

"Brail up your sail, there!" a man called from one of these. The sailors rushed to obey. The tugs, their bows padded with great coils of rope, chivvied the ship into place against one of the quays. Sailors threw lines to waiting dockmen, who made the merchantman fast to the dock. Argyros slung his duffel over his shoulder, belted on his sword, and climbed the gangplank. As he stepped onto the quay, one of the line-handlers pointed to the blade and said, "You want to be careful whipping that out, friend. This here's a big city—you get caught using a sword in a brawl and the prefect's men'll chop off your thumbs to make sure you don't do it twice."

The magistrianos looked down his long, thin nose. "I live in Constantinople—not just a city, but *the* city."

Only in Alexandria would anyone have disagreed with that. But the dockman just grunted and said, "Newcomer." He gave the word a feminine ending, so Argyros knew it meant Constantinople and not himself. Before Constantine turned sleepy Byzantium into the New Rome, Alexandria had been the premier city of the Roman east. Its citizens, plainly, still remembered . . . and resented.

The magistrianos carried his gear down the quay and into the city. He thought about walking along the Heptastadion to take a close look at the troubled pharos right away, but decided to settle in first. The weight of the duffelbag, which seemed to grow heavier at every step he took, played a large part in his decision.

He found a room not far from where the Heptastadion joined the main-

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land; the cross-topped domes of the nearby church of St. Athanasios gave him a landmark that would be visible from a good part of Alexandria. Though the town's streets made an orderly grid, Argyros was glad for any extra help he could get in finding his way around.

By the time he had unpacked, the sun was setting in crimson splendor above the Gate of the Moon to the west. Making headway with Alexandrian officials, he had been warned, was an all-day undertaking; no point in trying to start just as night was falling. He bought a loaf of bread, some onions, and a cup of wine at the tavern next to his lodging, then went back, hung the gauzy mosquito-netting he had rented over his bed, and went to sleep.

He dreamed of Helen, Helen as she was before the smallpox robbed her of first her beauty and then her life. He dreamed of her laughing blue eyes, of the way her lips felt on his, of her sliding a robe from her white shoulders, of her intimate caress—

He woke then. He always woke then. The sweat that bathed him did not spring from the weather—the north wind kept Alexandria pleasant in summer. He stared into the darkness, wishing the dream would either leave him or, just once, go on a few seconds more.

He had not touched a woman since Helen died. In the first months of mourning, he thought long and hard about abandoning the secular world for the peace of the monastery. The thought went through him still, now and again. But what sort of monk would he make when, as the dreams so clearly showed, fleshly pleasures yet held such power in his mind?

Slowly, slowly, he drifted back toward sleep. Maybe he would be lucky —or unlucky—enough to find the dream again.

In Constantinople, a letter with the seal and signature of George Lakhanodrakon would instantly have opened doors and loosened tongues for Argyros: the Master of Offices was one of the chief ministers of the Basileus of the Romans. Argyros was too junior a magistrianos to know the leader of the corps at all well, but who could tell that—who would risk angering George Lakhanodrakon?—from the letter?

It worked in Alexandria, too, but only after a fashion and only in conjunction with some out-and-out bribery. Two weeks, everything Argyros had won on board ship, and three nomismata more disappeared before a secretary showed him into the office of Mouamet Dekanos, deputy to the Augustal prefect who governed Egypt for the Basileus.

Dekanos, a slight, dark man with large circles under his eyes, read quickly through the letter Argyros presented to him: " 'Render this my trusted servant the same assistance you would me, for he has my full confidence,' " the administrator finished. He shoved the pile of papyri on his desk to one side, making a clear space in which he set the document

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from the capital. "I'll be glad to help you, uh, Argyros. Your business I can hope to finish one day, which is more than I can say for this mess here." He scowled at the papyri he had just moved.

"Illustrious sir?" Argyros said. Dekanos was important enough for him to make sure he sounded polite.

"This mess here," the prefect's deputy repeated with a sour sort of pride, "goes all the way back to the days of my name-saint."

"Of St. Mouamet?" Argyros felt his jaw drop. "But it's—what?—seven hundred years now since he converted to Christianity."

"So it is," Dekanos agreed. "So it is. If you know that, I suppose you know of the Persian invasion that sent him fleeing from his monastery to Constantinople."

The magistrianos nodded. Born a pagan Arab, Mouamet had found Christ on a trading run up into Syria, and ended his life as an archbishop in distant Ispania. He had also found a gift for hymnography; his canticles in praise of God and Christ were still sung all through the Empire. After such a remarkable and holy life, no wonder he had quickly been recognized as a saint.

Dekanos resumed, "That was the worst the Persians have ever hit the Empire. They even ruled here in Alexandria for fifteen years, and ruled by their own laws. A good many bequests were granted whose validity was open to challenge when Roman rule returned. This mess here"—he liked to repeat himself, Argyros noticed—"is *Pcheris vs. Sarapion*. It's one of those challenges."

"But it's—what?—seven hundred years!" Now it was Argyros' turn to say the same thing over again, this time in astonished protest.

"So?" Dekanos rolled his eyes. "Egyptian families are usually enormous; they don't die out, worse luck. And they love to go to law—it's more fun than the hippodrome, and with better odds, too. *And* any judgment can be endlessly appealed: the scribe misspelled this word, they'll say, or used an accusative instead of a genitive, which obviously changes the meaning of the latest decree. Obviously." Argyros had never heard it used as a swearword before. "And so—"

Living in an empire which had endured thirteen centuries since the Incarnation, and was mighty long before that, the magistrianos had always thought of continuity as something to be striven for. Now for the first time he saw its dark side; some timely chaos should long since have swept *Pcheris vs. Sarapion* into oblivion. No wonder Mouamet Dekanos had pouches under his eyes.

With an effort, Argyros dragged his thoughts back to the matter at hand. "As you have read, sir, the Emperor, may Christ preserve him, would be pleased if the rebuilding of your great pharos here proceeded

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at a more rapid pace. Through the Master of Offices, he has sent me from Constantinople to try to move the process along in any way I can."

The Augustal prefect governed Alexandria and Egypt from what had been the palace of the Ptolemies before Rome acquired the province. The promontory stood on Lokhias Point, which jutted into the sea from the eastern part of the city. By luck, the window in Dekanos's chamber faced northwest, toward the half-finished tower of stone that would—or might—one day become the restored lighthouse. At more than half a mile, the workers there would have seemed tiny as ants from the office, but there were none to see. Argyros's nod and wave said that more plainly than words.

Dekanos frowned. "My dear sir, we have been petitioning Constantinople for leave to rebuild the pharos since the earthquake toppled it, only to be ignored by several Emperors in succession. Only eight years have gone by since at last we were granted permission to go to work." (Argyros would not have said *only,* but Argyros did not have *Pcheris vs. Sarapion* and its ilk to deal with, either.) "We've not done badly since."

"No indeed, not on the whole," Argyros said with what seemed to be agreement. "Still, his imperial majesty is disappointed that progress has been so slow these past two years. Surely in a land so populous as this, he feels, adequate supplies of labor are available for the completion of any such task."

"Oh, aye, we have any number of convicted felons to grub rock in the quarries, and any number of strong-backed brainless oafs to haul it to the pharos." Dekanos kept his voice under tight control—he was as wary of Argyros as the other way round—but his choice of words showed his anger. "Skilled workers, though, stone-carvers and concrete-spreaders and carpenters for scaffolding and all the rest, are not so easy to come by. We've had trouble with them." He looked as though the admission pained him.

It puzzled the magistrianos. "But why? Surely they must obey an imperial order to provide their services."

"My dear sir, I can see you do not know Alexandria." Dekanos's chuckle held scant amusement. "The guilds—"

"Constantinople also has its guilds," Argyros interrupted. He still felt confused. "Every city in the Empire has its craftsmen's associations."

"No doubt, no doubt. But does Constantinople have *anakhoresis?"*

" 'Withdrawal'?" the magistrianos echoed. Now he was frankly floundering. "I'm sorry, but I don't follow you."

"The word means more than just 'withdrawal' in Egypt, I fear. The peasants in the farming villages along the Nile have always had the custom of simply running away—withdrawing—from their homes when

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taxes get too heavy or the flood fails. Usually they come back as things improve, though they may turn to banditry if the hard times last."

"Peasants do that all over the Empire—all over the world," Argyros shrugged. "How is Egypt any different?"

"Because here, *anakhoresis* goes a good deal further than that. If, say, a man is executed and the locals feel the sentence was unjust, whole villagefuls of them may withdraw in protest. And if"—Dekanos was ahead of the magistrianos' objection—"we try to punish the ringleaders or force the villagers back to their places, we're apt to just incite an even bigger *anakhoresis*. A couple of times the whole Nile valley has been paralyzed, from the Delta all the way down to the First Cataract."

Argyros understood the horror that came into the Alexandrian's voice at the prospect. In Constantinople, officials feared riots the same way, because one once had grown till it almost cast Justinian the Great from his throne. Every province, the magistrianos supposed, had special problems to give its rulers sleepless nights.

All the same, something did not add up here. "The peasants are not restless now, though, or you would not have said you had plenty of unskilled labor available," Argyros said slowly.

"Very good," Dekanos said, plainly pleased the magistrianos had stayed with him. "You are right, sir. Very good. But here in Alexandria, you see, the guilds have also learned to play the game of *anakhoresis*. Let something not go to their liking, and they walk away from their jobs."

"And that—"

"—is what has happened with the pharos, yes."

"May the Virgin preserve us all." Argyros felt his head begin to ache.

"There's more." Mouamet Dekanos seemed to take morbid pleasure in going on with his bad news. "As I say, this is Alexandria; we've dealt with guild *anakhoresis* before—or with one guild's withdrawing, anyway. But *all* the guilds pulled out of working on the pharos at the same time, and none will go back till they *all* agree they're happy. And this is Alexandria, where no one wants to agree with anyone about anything."

"Well," the magistrianos said, doing his best to hold on to reason, "they must all have been happy once upon a time, or no work ever would have been done. What made them want to, uh, withdraw in the first place?"

"Good question," Dekanos said. "I wish I had a good answer for you."

"So do I."

Most of the letters on the signs above shops in Alexandria's western district looked Greek, but most of the words they spelled out were nonsense to Argyros. He knew no Coptic; as well as confusing his eyes, the

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purring, hissing speech filled his ears, for the quarter known as Rhakotis had for centuries been the haunt of native Egyptians.

The locals eyed him suspiciously. His inches and relatively light skin said he was not one of them. But those same inches and the sword on his belt warned he was no one to trifle with. Hard looks were as far as the natives went.

He stepped into a cobbler's shop that advertised itself not only in Coptic but in intelligible if badly spelled Greek. As he'd hoped, the man inside had a smattering of that language. "Can you tell me how to find the street where the carpenters work?" the magistrianos asked. He jingled coins in his hand.

The cobbler did not hold out an open palm, though. "Why you want to know?" he growled.

"The leaders of their guild will have shops there, surely. I need to speak with them," Argyros said. The fellow, he noticed, had not denied knowing; he did not want to get his wind up. When the cobbler still said nothing, Argyros gave a mild prod: "If I intended anything more, would I not come with a squadron of soldiers who know *exactly* where the guildsmen work?"

The cobbler grinned at that. His teeth were very white against his dark brown skin. "Suppose you might," he admitted. He gave directions, so quickly that Argyros made him slow down and repeat them several times. Alexandria's grid of streets helped strangers find their way around, but only so much.

The magistrianos had a good ear for instructions. After only a couple of wrong turns, he found himself on a street loud with the pounding of hammers and fragrant from sawdust. Again he looked for a shop with a bilingual sign. When he found one, he stepped in and waited for the carpenter to look up from the chair he was repairing. The carpenter said something in Coptic, then, after a second look at Argyros, tried Greek: "What can I do for you today, sir?"

"You can start by telling me why the carpenters' guild has withdrawn from work on the pharos."

The carpenter's face, which had been open and interested a moment before, froze. "That's not for me to say, sir," he answered slowly. "You need to talk to one of the chiefs."

"Excellent," Argyros said, making the man blink. "Suppose you take me to one."

Outmaneuvered, the carpenter set down his mallet. He turned his head, shouted. After a few seconds, a stripling who looked just like him came out of a back room. A rapid colloquy in Coptic followed. The carpenter turned back to Argyros. "My son will watch the shop while we are gone. Come."

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He sounded resentful, and kept looking back at the mallet on the floor. Then he saw the magistrianos' hand resting on the hilt of his sword. Shaking his head, he led Argyros out into the street.

Argyros glanced up at the sign again. "Your name is Teus?" he asked. The carpenter nodded. "And who is the man to whom you're taking me?"

"He is called Khesphmois," Teus said. He kept his mouth shut the rest of the way to Khesphmois's shop.

KHESPHMOIS—MASTER CARPENTER, the sign above the establishment declared in Greek and, Argyros supposed, Coptic. The look of the place did not contradict the sign's claim. It was three times the size of Teus's shop, and on a busier corner to boot. People bustled in and out, and the racket of several men working carried out to the street.

Teus led Argyros through the beaded entrance-curtain that did something, at least, to keep flies outside. A carpenter looked up from the dowel he was filing, smiled and nodded at Teus. The fellow did not seem to be Khesphmois himself, for Teus's sentence had the master carpenter's name in it and sounded like a question.

The other man's reply had to mean something like, "I'll bring him." He got up, hurried off. When he came back from behind a pile of boards a moment later, he had with him another man, one with only a few more years than Argyros's thirty or so. The magistrianos was expecting a graybeard, but this vigorous fellow had to be Khesphmois.

So he was. Teus bowed to him, at the same time dropping a hand to his own knee, an Egyptian greeting Argyros had already seen a dozen times in the streets of Rhakotis. When Khesphmois had returned the salute, Teus spoke for a couple of minutes in Coptic, pointing at the magistrianos as he did so.

Khesphmois's round, clean-shaven face went surprisingly stern as Teus drew to a close. Like Teus—like all the carpenters in the shop—he wore only sandals and a white linen skirt that reached from his waist to just above his knees, but he also clothed himself in dignity. In good Greek, he asked Argyros, "Who are you, a stranger, to question the long-established right of our guild to withdraw from a labor we have found onerous past any hope of toleration?"

"I am Basil Argyros, magistrianos in the service of his imperial majesty, the *Basileus* Nikephoros III, from Constantinople," Argyros replied. Khesphmois's shop went suddenly quiet as everyone within earshot stopped work to stare. Into that sudden silence, the magistrianos went on, "I might add that in Constantinople, guilds have no right of *anakhoresis,* long-established or otherwise. Seeking as he does to restore what is an ornament to your city and its commerce, the Emperor does not look with favor on your refusal to cooperate in that work. He has

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sent me here—" a slight exaggeration, but one that would not be wasted on the carpenters "—to do what I can to move it forward once more."

The carpenters spoke to—before long, yelled at—one another in Coptic. Argyros wished he could follow what they were saying. Whatever it was, it got hotter by the second. Finally Khesphmois, who had been less noisy than most, raised his hand in an almost imperial gesture of command. Quiet slowly returned.

The master carpenter told Argyros, "This is *not* Constantinople, sir, and you would do well to remember it. So would the Emperor. You may tell him so, if you have his ear." Khesphmois spoke in dry tones, seeming used to officials who boasted of their lofty connections. Argyros felt his ears grow hot. Khesphmois continued, "Perhaps you should pick another guild to try to frighten. The carpenters stand firm." Teus and those of Khesphmois's men who knew Greek snarled agreement.

"You misunderstand me—" Argyros began to protest.

"And you misunderstand us," Khesphmois broke in. "Now go, or it will be the worst for you. Get out!" Just because he hadn't shouted before, Argyros had judged that he did not care to. That was a mistake.

The magistrianos kept his hand away from his sword this time. Too many men had too many potential weapons close by. "The prefect will hear of your intransigence," he warned. "He may try to root it out by force."

"He has known of it for a long time," Khesphmois retorted. "And if he uses force, there will be *anakhoresis* by every guild in Alexandria. We will stop the city. He knows that, too. So—" He jerked a thumb toward the curtain of beads.

Furious and frustrated, Argyros turned to go. He was reaching out to shove the beads aside when someone behind him called, "Wait!" He spun round, startled. It was a woman's voice.

"Zois," Khesphmois said, naming her and at the same time letting the magistrianos know from the mixture of patience and annoyance in his voice that she was his wife. He had used that same tone with Helen, and she with him, many times. As always, sorrow stabbed him when he thought of her.

"Don't 'Zois' me," the woman snapped; her Greek was as good as her husband's. "You are making a mistake if you turn this man from Constantinople into an enemy."

"I don't think so," Khesphmois said, also in Greek. Maybe only a couple of his men spoke it, Argyros thought, and he wanted to keep the family spat as private as he could. He was sure that was a forlorn hope, but grateful because it let him follow the talk.

"I know you don't. That's why I came out," Zois said. She was a few years younger than her husband, slim where he would soon be portly,

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and quite short. Her high cheekbones were the best feature of her swarthy face, those and her eyes, which were very large and dark. Her chin was delicate, but the wide mouth above it was at the moment thin and firmly set.

The magistrianos waited for Khesphmois to send his wife away for interfering in men's business. As he would learn, though, Egyptians were easier about such things than was usual at Constantinople. And even in the capital, men who exercised all the control over their wives that was legally theirs were most of them unhappily wed.

"Can you afford to be wrong?" Zois demanded. Her hand went to the silk collar of her blue linen tunic. Only someone well off could have afforded the ornament. "If you are wrong, we will lose everything, and not just us but all the carpenters and all the other guilds. If someone comes all the way from Constantinople to see to this business, he will not just up and leave."

"Your lady wife—" Argyros gave her his best bow "—is right. I am not especially wise, but I am especially stubborn. I should also tell you I am not a good man to sink in a canal, in case the thought crossed your mind. Magistrianoi look after their own."

"No," Khesphmois said absently; that he was still more intent on arguing with Zois made Argyros believe him. To her, his hands on hips in irritation, the master carpenter went on, "What would you have me do, then? Call off the *anakhoresis* now?"

"Of course not," she answered at once. "But why not show him the reasons for it? He *is* from far away; what can he know of how things are here in Alexandria? When he sees, when he hears, maybe he will have the influence in the capital to make the prefect and his henchmen easier on us. What have you to lose by trying?"

"Maybe, maybe, maybe," Khesphmois mocked. "Maybe I will turn into a crocodile and spend the next hundred years basking on a sandbank, too, but I don't lose any sleep over it." Still, for his wife's last question he had no good answer, and so, scowling, he growled to Argyros, "Come along then, if you must. I'll take you to the pharos, and we'll find out if you have eyes in your head to see with."

Teus and a couple of other carpenters started to protest, but Khesphmois shouted them down in Coptic that sounded pungent. "Thank you," the magistrianos said to him, and got only another scowl for an answer. The magistrianos turned to Zois, bowed again. "And thank you, my lady." He spoke as formally as if to a Constantinopolitan noblewoman, as much in the hope of vexing Khesphmois as for any other reason.

He was surprised when Zois dipped her head in the same elegant acknowledgment one of those noblewomen might have used. He had a moment to notice how gracefully her neck curved. Then Khesphmois

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repeated, "Come along, you." Without waiting to see whether Argyros would follow, the master carpenter stamped out into the street.

The magistrianos hurried after him. "Goodbye," Zois called. "Goodbye, the both of you." That nearly brought Argyros up short, not so much because she was polite enough to include him but because she used the dual number, the special—and most archaic—grammatical form reserved for pairs.

Even coming from his imagined noblewoman, the dual would have sounded pretentious. Hearing it from an Egyptian carpenter's wife was strange indeed. Argyros wondered where she could have learned it. When thinking back later on, he decided that was the first time she became an individual for him.

At the time, though, the thought was gone in an eyeblink, because he had to hustle along to catch up with Khesphmois. The master carpenter was short and stocky, but moved with a grim determination that Argyros, even with his longer legs, was hard-pressed to match.

He tried several times to make small talk. Khesphmois answered only in grunts. The one thing Argyros really wanted to say—"Your wife is an interesting woman"—he could not, not to a man he had known less than an hour and who was no friend of his. He soon walked on in silence, which seemed to suit Khesphmois well enough.

The master carpenter might also have been impervious to heat, no mean asset in Alexandria. He tramped along the raised road that still marked the path of the original, narrow Heptastadion, then east on the southern coast of the island of Pharos to the base of the lighthouse there.

The pharos, even in its present half-rebuilt state, grew more awe-inspiring with every step Argyros took toward it. He had long thought no building could be grander than Constantinople's great church of Hagia Sophia, but the sheer vertical upthrust of the pharos had a brusque magnificence of its own. Already it was taller than the top of Hagia Sophia's central dome, and would reach twice that height if ever finished.

Khesphmois craned his neck at the towering pillar, too. "It only goes to show," he said, "that Alexandria breeds real men."

Argyros snorted, suspecting locals had been using that joke on newcomers for all the sixteen centuries since Sostratos first erected (coming up with that word made the magistrianos snort all over again) the phallos. *Pharos,* he corrected himself sternly, ordering his mind to stop playing tricks with words. Suddenly he felt every day of his two years of celibacy.

His mental order proved easier to carry out than he had expected. As he and Khesphmois approached the lighthouse, he began to take more notice of the line of men marching in front of it. Some of them carried

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placards. Argyros frowned, puzzled. "Are they mendicant monks?" he asked the master carpenter. "They are not in monastic garb."

Khesphmois threw back his head and laughed. "Hardly. Come with me yet a little farther, and you will see."

Shrugging, the magistrianos obeyed. He saw that not all the men by the pharos were marching after all. The ones who were just standing around looked like a squad of light infantry—they had no body armor, but wore helmets and carried shields and spears. They also looked monumentally bored. One trooper, in fact, was fast asleep, leaning back against the lighthouse's lowest course of stonework.

The marchers seemed hardly more excited than the soldiers; Argyros was certain they were doing something they had done many times before. Then he drew close enough to read their placards, and doubted in rapid succession his conclusions and his eyesight.

THIS LABOR IS TOO DANGEROUS FOR ANY MAN TO CARRY OUT, one sign said. PALTRY PAY FOR DEADLY WORK, another shrieked. CARPENTERS AND CONCRETE-SPREADERS WITHDRAW TOGETHER, shouted a third. Others were in Coptic, but the magistrianos had no doubt they were equally inflammatory.

"Why don't the soldiers drive them away?" he demanded of Khesphmois. "Why are they here, if not for that? Have the guilds bribed the commander of the watch to let this sedition go on?" He was shocked to the core. Such an insolent display at Constantinople—or any other town he knew—would instantly have landed the marchers in prison.

"At least your questions are to the point," the master carpenter said. "A good thing, since you have so many of them."

"May your answers match my questions, then." Argyros felt brief pride at his sardonic response; he did not want Khesphmois to know just how disturbed he was.

"Very well," Khesphmois said. "The soldiers are here mostly to see that the marchers do no pilfering. And no, we have not bribed the watch commander, though I must say we tried. But Cyril is an honest man, worse luck for us."

By then, the magistrianos suspected that trying to hide his shock was a losing battle. Anywhere else in the Empire, if artisans refused to work—in itself unlikely—soldiers would simply force them to return. But Mouamet Dekanos struck Argyros as being plenty bright enough to try that if he thought it would work. That meant, Argyros concluded unhappily, that Khesphmois and the other guild leaders really could raise Alexandria if these weird privileges of theirs were tampered with.

"Egypt," Argyros muttered. Nowhere else in the Empire would such nonsense as *Pcheris vs. Sarapion* have dragged on for seven hundred years, either. The magistrianos gathered himself, turned back to Khes-

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phmois. "Why," he asked carefully, "have all you workers chosen to withdraw?"

The master carpenter looked at him with something like respect. "Do you know, you are the first official who ever bothered to ask that. The prefect and his staff just told us to go back to work, the way they do during a usual *anakhoresis*. Any other time we would, eventually. But not now. Not here. So they have waited, not daring to set soldiers on us and not knowing what else to do, and we have stayed away and nothing has got done."

That sounded appallingly likely to Argyros. If a contested inheritance could stay contested for seven centuries, what were a couple of years here or there in putting a pharos back together? Delay would be a way of life for the local bureaucrats, here even more than in most of the Empire. Well, one of the things magistrianoi were for was shaking up officials too set in their ways.

"I'm asking," the magistrianos said. "Why haven't you gone back to work?"

"By St. Cyril, I'll show you," Khesphmois exclaimed. "Follow me, if you've the stomach—and the head—for it."

He walked past the sign-carriers, waving to a couple from the carpenters' guild. The watchmen only nodded at him; by now, Argyros supposed, they must know him as well as their own officers. The magistrianos, who was on their side, got more hard looks than the master carpenter.

Khesphmois walked into the pharos. Argyros followed still. Their footsteps echoed in the gloom within. Khesphmois hurried over to the spiral stair just inside the doorway and started up.

The stairway was almost as dark as the chamber that led to it, though window openings set at intervals into the thick wall gave enough light for the magistrianos to see where he was putting his feet. The idea of stumbling and rolling down so long a stairway made his sweat turn cold.

By the time he reached the top even of the truncated pharos, Argyros had sweat in plenty. Ahead of him, Khesphmois still seemed fresh. The magistrianos muttered to himself as he panted up the last few steps. His time behind a desk in Constantinople was making him soft.

Alexandria's usual northerly breeze helped cool him while he got his breath back. He turned his back to the breeze, peered across the Great Harbor at the city. The view was superb. He even towered high above the ancient obelisks—"Cleopatra's Needles," the locals called them, but they were older than that—not far from the Heptastadion's southern root.

He had no idea how long he might have stood there staring, but Khesphmois's dry cough recalled him to himself. "I didn't bring you up here to sightsee," the master carpenter said. "Look straight down."

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A long stride and a short one brought the magistrianos to the edge of the stone block on which he stood. No fence or rail separated him from a couple of hundred feet of empty space. He cautiously peered over the edge; only the discipline he had acquired in the Roman army kept him from going to his knees or belly first. Far, far below, the marchers and watchmen looked tiny as insects. Argyros was anything but sorry to step back. "A long way down," he observed, stating the obvious.

Khesphmois had been watching him closely. "You're a cool one," he said, not sounding happy to admit it. "But how would *you* like to be working up here instead of just standing?"

"I wouldn't," the magistrianos admitted at once. "But then, it's not my proper trade."

"Working this high is no one's proper trade," Khesphmois said. "If you take a wrong step, if someone bumps you by accident, if a piece of scaffolding breaks while you're on it, even if you make a bad stroke with your hammer, over you go and nothing's left of you but a red smear on the rocks. There are plenty of them down below, and there would have been many more if we hadn't staged the *anakhoresis*."

"Some, certainly," Argyros nodded. "Some trades are dangerous: the mines, the army, and, plainly, working at heights like this. But why do you say many?"

"The pharos is square in section thus far, yes?" Khesphmois said.

The magistrianos nodded again.

"Well, the next part is to be octagonal, and narrower—a tiny bit narrower," the master carpenter went on. "What would you expect to happen to the carpenters who will have to face inward with almost no room at all to put their feet while they try to set up scaffolds, or to the stonecutters who try to climb onto the scaffolding to trim and polish the outsides of the blocks, or the concrete-spreaders who take away the excess that squeezes out from between the courses of blocks?"

"The risks are worse now, you're telling me," Argyros said slowly.

"That's just what I'm telling you."

"How do we make them less, then?" the magistrianos asked. "Enough less, I mean, to get the various guilds to come back to work? Alexandria and the whole Empire need this pharos restored."

"And Alexandria and the whole Empire care not a moldy fig how many workers die restoring it," Khesphmois said bitterly. "Now you've seen the problem, man from Constantinople. What do you aim to do about it?"

"Right now, I don't know," Argyros said. "I truly do not. I work no miracles, though this is a column any pillar-sitting saint might envy."

Khesphmois grunted. "You're honest, at any rate. You—" He stopped; the magistrianos had raised a hand.

"I wasn't finished. One way or another, I will find you an answer. I

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swear it by God, the Virgin, and St. Mouamet, who as patron of changes will be apt to hear my oath."

"So he will." Khesphmois crossed himself; Argyros copied the gesture. The master carpenter went on, "Whether the Augustal prefect and his staff pay you any heed, though, is something else again." Without waiting for an answer, he started down the stairway. After a final long look at the panorama of the city, Argyros followed.

That afternoon, back on the mainland once more, he peered out toward the half-erected pharos. Thinking of it like that reminded him of the bawdy pun he had unwittingly made earlier in the day. And thinking of that pun made *him* come half-erect.

He scowled and clenched his fists, trying to force his body back under the control of his will. His body, as bodies do, resisted. Oh, you'd make a fine monk, he told himself angrily, a wonderful monk: they'd canonize you after you died, under the name St. Basil Priapos. This was a fine way to remember Helen.

But he remembered her all too vividly, remembered the touch of her lips and the surge of her body against his. He caught himself wondering how Zois would be. That thought made him angrier than ever: not only was it shameful lust, it betrayed the memory of his dead wife. He still wondered, though.

When he dreamed that night, as always he woke too soon.

"My dear sir, surely you are joking!" Mouamet Dekanos's eyebrows climbed toward his hairline. "You want me to sit down and dicker with these, these laborers? Think of the ghastly precedent it would set! Ghastly!"

"I've thought of it," Argyros admitted. "I don't like it. I don't like seeing the pharos still half-built, either. Nor does the Emperor. That problem is immediate. The precedent will just have to take care of itself."

Dekanos stared at him as if he had just proposed converting the whole population of the Roman Empire to Persian sun-worship by force. "Precedent, my dear sir, is part of the glue that holds the Empire together," he said stiffly.

"So it is," the magistrianos said. "The grain shipments from Alexandria to Constantinople are another part, and the Emperor has lost patience with having ships on their way back here go astray without need. In this case, he reckons that of greater importance than precedent."

"So *you* say," Dekanos retorted. "So you say."

"Would you like me to meet with the Augustal prefect and ask his opinion of your attitude?"

The Alexandrian functionary's face went dark with anger. "You're bluffing."

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"Try me." As a matter of fact, Argyros was. In an argument with someone from the distant, resented capital, he was sure the prefect would back his own aide. Had he been an intimate of the Master of Offices instead of merely one of his magistrianoi, though, not even the Augustal prefect could have afforded to ignore him. And George Lakhanodrakon's letter made him seem to be one. He rose, took out the parchment and unrolled it, flourished it in Dekanos's face. "You *do* recall this, I hope?"

"Well, what if I do?" Dekanos was still scowling. "For that matter," he went on angrily, "how will you be able to gather all these fractious guild leaders together and make them and their guild members abide by anything they might agree to? For all you know, they will say one thing to ease the pressure on them and then turn round and do just the opposite."

When the official shifted the basis of the argument, Argyros knew he had his man. "If they do that, would they not have gone beyond the bounds even of what you Alexandrians tolerate in an *anakhoresis?*" he asked. "You could then use whatever force you had to with less fear of bringing the whole city to the point of insurrection."

"Perhaps." Dekanos pursed his lips. "Perhaps."

"As for gathering the leaders of the guilds," the magistrianos said persuasively, "leave that to me. I wouldn't think of formally involving you with speaking to them until everything on the other side was in readiness."

"Certainly not," Dekanos said, mollified by Argyros' apparent concern for proper procedure. "Hmm. Yes, I suppose you can go forward, then, provided you do it on those terms and provided you stress our unique clemency in treating with the artisans in this one special case."

"Of course," said the magistrianos, who had no intention of stressing anything of the sort. He bowed his way out of Dekanos's office, and did not grin until his back was to the Alexandrian. Grinning still, he headed for Kho[illegible]hmois's shop in the district of Rhakotis.

He did not see the master carpenter when he walked through the beaded curtain. Only one of the journeymen was there, luckily one who spoke some Greek. The fellow said, "He not back till tomorrow. He helping build—how you say?—grandstand for parade. Busy all night, he say." The man chuckled. "He terrible mad about that. I there, too, but have this cabinet to repair for rich man. He want it now, no matter what. Rich men like that."

"Yes," Argyros said, though he knew nothing of being rich from personal experience. He hesitated, then asked, "What does the parade celebrate?"

"Feast-day for St. Arsenios."

"Oh." Argyros wondered what the saint, a man who had withdrawn

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from the world to live out his life as a monk in the Egyptian desert, would think of having his memory celebrated with a large, noisy parade. He shrugged. That was the Alexandrians' problem. Khesphmois was his. "I'll come back tomorrow afternoon, then. I do need to see your master." He turned to go, thinking that as long as he was in this part of the city, Teus might direct him to some other master carpenters.

"Can I do anything to help you, man from Constantinople?"

Argyros had just put his hand in the entranceway to thrust aside the strings of beads. Now he jerked it back. Small spheres of glass and painted clay clicked off one another. "Truly I don't know, my lady," he said. His unspoken thought was, that depends on how much influence you have on your husband.

Zois might have picked it out of the air. "I know you did not come all this way simply to see *me*," she said, her eyebrows and the corners of her mouth lifting slightly in a cynical smile. Eve might have worn that smile, Argyros thought, when God came to talk business with Adam, and later given Adam his comeuppance for the visit. He put aside his blasphemous maunderings; Zois was going on, "Still, perhaps we could discuss it over a cup of wine."

The magistrianos's eyes flicked to the journeyman carpenter, but the fellow did not look up from the work he had resumed. And no wonder: with her husband absent, Zois had not presumed to come out alone to speak with Argyros. A servant girl stood behind her, a pretty little thing who could not have been more than fifteen and who was, the magistrianos saw, about eight months pregnant.

He considered. "Thank you," he said at last. "Maybe we could."

"This way," Zois said, then spoke in Coptic to the servant girl, who dipped her head and hurried off. "Don't let fear of Lukra's spying on us worry you," Zois told the magistrianos as she led him back toward the rooms where she and Khesphmois lived. "She has no Greek. My husband did not take her on for that." She smiled her ancient smile again.

Like the shop, the home behind it was of mud brick. The rooms were small and rather dark. The furniture was splendid, though, which surprised Argyros until he remembered Khesphmois's trade.

Lukra came back a few minutes later with wine, dates candied in honey, and sheets of flat, chewy unleavened bread. Zois waited for the girl to pour the wine, spoke again in Coptic. Lukra disappeared. "She will not be back," Zois said, nodding to herself. She raised her cup to the magistrianos. "Health to you."

"Health to you," he echoed, drinking. The vintage was not one he knew, which meant it was most likely a local one not reckoned fine enough to export. It was not bad, though, and had a tartness that cut through the cloyingly sweet taste of the dates.

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Zois ate, then wiped her hands and patted at her mouth with a square of embroidered linen. "Now," she said when she was through, "what do you need from Khesphmois?"

"His cooperation in getting the other leaders of the carpenters' guild, and the men who head the rest of the guilds that have withdrawn from work on the pharos, to talk with the Augustal prefect's deputy so they can agree on a way to get construction started again."

Her eyes, already large, seemed to grow further as she widened them in surprise. "You can arrange this?"

"If the guildsmen will play their part, yes. I already have the agreement from the prefect's deputy. The pharos is too important not only to Alexandria but to all the Empire to be delayed by this *anakhoresis*."

"I agree," Zois said at once. "I warned Khesphmois from the outset that the guilds were facing too dangerous a foe in the city government, because it could crush them if their stubbornness pushed it to the point of wanting to. I will help with anything that has a hope of ending the *anakhoresis* peacefully."

"Thank you." Argyros did not tell her the Augustal prefect and his staff were as frightened of the guilds' power as she was of the government's. Having both sides wary was probably a good idea. He went on, "Do you think you can sway your husband to your point of view?"

"I suspect so. Khesphmois is more likely to insist on having his own way on matters where there is no risk to him." The magistrianos thought that was only sensible, and true of anyone. Then Zois went on, "Take Lukra, for instance. Khesphmois did." Bitterness welled forth in her voice.

"*Did* he?" Argyros's interest, among other things, rose. So *that* was why she was seeing him alone, he thought: for the sake of revenge on her husband. That was sinful. So was the act of adultery itself. At the moment, the magistrianos did not care. Relief would have been easy to buy at any time since Helen died. Despite his body's urgings, he had held back.

This, though . . . Zois was attractive in an exotic way, clever enough for him to hope to enjoy her mind as well as her body. And she might be his for as long as he was in Alexandria, long enough, perhaps, for something more than desire—or her anger at Khesphmois—to bind them together. It would not be what he had known with his wife, but it could be better than the emptiness that had ruled his life these past years.

He got up, took a step toward Zois's chair. Then he noticed she had not stopped talking while lust filled his head. She was saying, "But for all his faults, he is not a bad man at bottom, you know. I would not see him hurt in any way, and he would be, he and many others, if the *anakhoresis* were put down by force."

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"Yes, that's likely so," the magistrianos agreed woodenly. He sat back down.

Zois sighed. "If God had not willed that I be barren, I am sure Khesphmois would have left Lukra alone. And when the child is born, he and I will rear it as if it were our own." Her laugh was shaky. "Here I am going on about my own life, when you came to talk of weighty affairs. I do apologize."

"Think nothing of it, my lady." Now the magistrianos's voice sounded as it should. So *that* was why she was seeing him alone, he thought again, but this time with a different reason behind the *that:* unburdening herself to a sympathetic stranger had to be easier than talking with a neighbor or friend here. A stranger would not be likely to gossip.

Argyros laughed at himself. Before he married Helen, he had never imagined himself irresistible to women. Thinking Zois had found him so was bracing. It made him proud. He knew what pride went before. Even as he had that thought, he felt himself falling.

"You are a kind man," Zois said. "As I told you, I will do my best to make sure my husband lends his influence to meeting with the prefect's men and trying to end the *anakhoresis*. And now, would you care for another date?" She held out the platter to him.

"No, thank you." When the magistrianos got up this time, he did not approach the master carpenter's wife. "I'm glad I can count on you, but now I do have other business to attend to." He let her show him out.

As the beads clicked behind him, he wondered what the other business was. For the life of him, he could not think of any. Maybe escaping his own embarrassment counted.

He walked north to the street of Kanopos, Alexandria's main east-west thoroughfare, the one on which St. Athanasios's church fronted. With nothing better to do, he thought he would imitate many of the locals and lie down in his room during the midday heat.

Someone plucked at the sleeve of his tunic. He whirled, one hand dropping to the hilt of his sword—like any large city, Alexandria was full of light-fingered rogues. But this was no rogue—it was a girl two or three years older than Zois's maidservant. Under the paint on her face, she might have been pretty were she less thin. "Go to bed with me?" she said; Argyros would bet it was most of the Greek she knew. No, she had a bit more, a price: "Twenty folleis."

A big copper coin for an embrace. . . . The magistrianos had rejected such advances before without having to think twice. Now, his blood already heated from what he had thought—no, hoped, he admitted to himself—he heard himself say, "Where?"

The girl's face lit up. She *was* pretty, he saw, at least when she smiled. She led him to a tiny chamber that opened onto an alley a couple of

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blocks from the street of Kanopos. With the door shut, the cubicle was hot, stuffy, and nearly night-dark. Argyros knew the much-used straw pallet would have bugs, but the girl was pulling her shift off over her head, lying down and waiting for him to join her. He did.

Afterwards, he saw her scorn even in the gloom. After so long without a woman, he had spent himself almost at once. But that long denial was not to be relieved with a single round. "You pay twice," she warned, but then she was moving with him, urging him on. Harlots had their wiles, he knew, but he thought he pleased her the second time. He knew he pleased himself.

He knew he pleased her when he gave her a silver miliaresion, much more than she had asked of him. Maybe, for a while, she would be a little less scrawny.

His conscience troubled him as he finished the interrupted walk to his room. Such a sordid way to end his mourning for his wife: a skinny whore in a squalid crib. But he had not stopped mourning Helen, nor would he ever. He had only proven what he already knew—that wish as he might, he was not fit by nature for the single life.

And knowing that, would it have been better, he asked himself, to have returned to the sensual world with an act of adultery as well as one of fornication? He thought of Zois, of how attractive he had found her, and was not sure of the answer.

With an expression of barely concealed dislike, Mouamet Dekanos watched the guildsmen file into the meeting-chamber. Argyros, who was sitting at one side of the table (he had left Dekanos the head), gave him credit for trying to conceal it.

The guildsmen were not even trying. They glowered impartially at both men waiting for them. They also frankly gaped at the magnificence of the hall in which they were received. Even in their finest clothes, they looked out of place, or rather looked like what they were—workmen in a palace.

"Illustrious sirs," Khesphmois said, nervously dipping his head to Argyros and Dekanos. As he slid into a chair, he went on, "These men with me are Hergeus son of Thotsytmis of the concrete-spreaders' guild and Miysis son of Seias of the guild of stonecutters."

"Yes, thank you, Khesphmois," Dekanos said. "Of course, I have had dealings with all you gentlemen—" he spat out the word as if it tasted bad "—before, but your comrades will be new to Argyros. He is here all the way from Constantinople itself, to help us settle our differences."

"Illustrious sir," Hergeus and Miysis murmured as they took their seats. Like the other Alexandrians Argyros had met, they made a good game show of looking unimpressed at the mention of the capital.

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Miysis, the magistrianos thought, carried it off better. The stonecutters' leader was a squat, powerful man in his mid-fifties. His nose had been broken and a scar seamed one weathered cheek, but the eyes in that bruiser's face were disconcertingly keen. After sizing Argyros up, he turned to Dekanos and demanded, "How's he going to do that, illustrious sir, when we already know what's going on and can't see any way out?" Though his voice was a raspy growl, he did not speak bad Greek.

"I will leave that to the magistrianos to explain for himself," Dekanos answered.

"Thank you," Argyros said, ignoring the tone that made Dekanos's reply mean, *I haven't the slightest idea.* "Sometimes, gentlemen, ignorance is an advantage: both sides in this *anakhoresis,* I would say, have clung so long and stubbornly to their own views that they have forgotten others are possible. Perhaps I will be able to show you all something new yet acceptable to everyone."

"Pah," was all Miysis said to that. Hergeus added, "Perhaps I'll swim the length of the Nile tomorrow, too, but I wouldn't bet on it."

His grin made the words sting less than they would have otherwise. Like Khesphmois, he was young to be a guild leader, but there the resemblance between them ended. Hergeus was tall for an Egyptian, and as skinny as the trollop Argyros had bedded a few days before.

"We are here talking together," Khesphmois pointed out. "That is something new."

The master carpenter, Argyros knew, was to some degree an ally, if only because this meeting set his prestige on the line. The magistrianos had trouble caring. Memories of the way he had abandoned his self-imposed celibacy kept crowding in on him. The act itself shamed him less than the thoughtless way he had yielded to his animal urges.

Hergeus had said something to him while he was woolgathering. Frowning, he pulled himself back to the matter at hand. "I'm sorry, sir, I missed that."

"Seeing things we can't again, eh?" But the concrete-pourer was smiling still, in a way that invited everyone to share his amusement. "Well, I just want to know how you can make the risk of death and maiming worth the niggardly wages we got for work on the pharos."

"We pay as well as anyone else," Dekanos snapped, nettled.

"But I can make chairs and cabinets without the fear of turning into a red splash on the ground if I sneeze at the wrong time," Khesphmois said.

"Would higher pay bring you back to the pharos?" Argyros asked.

The three guild representatives looked at one another. Then they all looked at Mouamet Dekanos. "Out of the question," he said. "The precedent that would set is pernicious."

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"It's not just the silver, anyhow," Miysis said. "My lads would sooner do other work, and that's all there is to it. We're tired of using guild fees to pay for funerals. We had as many in the work on the pharos as in a couple of generations before."

"Enough silver might tempt some concrete-spreaders back," Hergeus said, "the young ones, the bolder ones, the ones without families to worry over. The ones up to their chins in debt, too, I suppose."

"Aye, some of us, too, I would say," Khesphmois agreed. "*Enough* silver."

"Yes, and let us grant your first demand here and what would come of it?" Dekanos said. "You'd make another and another, till you'd hold out for a nomisma every hour on the hour. Who could afford to pay you then?"

Hergeus chuckled. "It's a problem I'd like to have."

"It's not one the powerful men of the city would like to have," Dekanos retorted. That brought things down to basics, Argyros thought. Naturally Dekanos worried first about Alexandria's upper classes; they were the men he had to keep happy. Even the Augustal prefect needed to worry about what they thought, though his responsibility was to the Emperor. If they turned against him, what could he accomplish?

That was also true of the guilds, however, at least this time, although Dekanos seemed unwilling to recognize it. Argyros did not care one way or the other. All he wanted to see was the pharos getting taller again. He said, "I think we can keep the problem of precedent from getting out of hand if we establish a special rate of pay for the specific task of rebuilding the lighthouse. Then we will not have to worry about it again unless the earth trembles again, which God prevent."

"I don't care what we get paid," Miysis said. "So long as we have any other work at all, we won't go near the cursed pharos. Money's no good to a dead man. And I'd like to see you make it go up without us stonecutters."

Argyros felt like kicking the stubborn guildsman under the table. "Purely for the sake of discussion," he said to Khesphmois and Hergeus, "how much of a boost in pay would it take to bring your comrades out once more?"

The two locals spoke together in rapid Coptic. Khesphmois switched to Greek: "Twice as much, and not a single copper follis less."

Dekanos clapped a hand to his forehead, cried, "You made a mistake, Argyros! You summoned men from the thieves' guild to meet with me." To the guildsmen, he said, "If you hope to gain anything from this meeting, you must show reason. I might, perhaps, under the special circumstances the magistrianos described, seek authorization for a raise of, ah,

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say one part in twelve, but surely could not gain approval for any more than that."

"One part in twelve is no raise at all. Look at the wealth around you!" Khesphmois exclaimed, waving his hand at the chamber in which they sat. Far from being overawed, the master carpenter was clever enough to use that splendor as a weapon for his cause. Argyros was impressed, Dekanos plainly discomfited.

"You are willing, then, illustrious sir, to raise our pay?" Hergeus asked.

"As I said, under these special circumstances—" Dekanos began.

The concrete-spreaders' leader cut him off with a wave of the hand. "You said before that you wouldn't give us any raise at all. If a woman says she won't and then does after you give her ten nomismata, she's just as much a whore as if she did it for a follis. The only difference is her price, and that you can dicker over. That's what we're down to now, illustrious sir: dickering over the price. And I stand with Khesphmois—one part in twelve is no raise at all."

Mouamet Dekanos glowered at Hergeus. "Your tongue is altogether too free." The official glowered at Argyros, too, presumably for putting him in a position where he had to listen to blunt talk from a social inferior. Argyros hardly noticed. Every mention of whores brought his mind back to the girl he had bedded, and seemed calculated only to lacerate his conscience.

Reality returned when Dekanos began drumming his fingers on the table. "Who's best to declare what a fair raise would be?" the magistrianos said quickly, to cover his lapse. "Neither side here trusts the other. Why not let, hmm, the patriarch of Alexandria arbitrate the dispute?"

He had been thinking out loud, nothing more, but the words seemed a happy inspiration the moment they were out of his mouth. He smiled, waiting for Dekanos and the guildsmen to acclaim his Solomonic wisdom.

Instead, they all stared at him. "Er—which patriarch of Alexandria?" Dekanos and Khesphmois asked at the same time, the first time they had been more than physically together since they sat down at the same table.

"*Which* patriarch?" The magistrianos scratched his head.

"For politeness' sake, I will assume all three of these gentlemen are of orthodox faith," Dekanos said, "and also because assuming otherwise would bring down on me one more trouble than I need right now. Surely, however, many of their followers adhere to the dogmas—" he did not, Argyros noticed, say "heresy" "—of the monophysites, and thus would not trust the orthodox patriarch to be disinterested. And I certainly cannot grant official recognition to the monophysites', ah, leader." Dekanos did not say "patriarch" either, not in the same breath with monophysites.

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Argyros felt his face grow hot. He gave an embarrassed nod. The monophysites—those who believed Christ to have had only one nature, the divine, after the Incarnation—had been strong in Egypt for nine hundred years, ecumenical councils to the contrary notwithstanding. Of course they would have a shadow ecclesiastical organization of their own, and of course Dekanos could not formally treat with it. Doing so would imply orthodoxy was not the only possible truth. No official of the Roman Empire could ever admit that; Argyros was reluctant to think it even as a condition contrary to fact.

"This is all so much moonshine," Miysis rumbled. The stonecutter got to his feet and stomped toward the door, adding over his shoulder, "I already said once it's not the money, and I meant it. My lads'll find other things to do, thank you very much, illustrious sir." He walked out.

"Damnation." Mouamet Dekanos glared after him, then slowly turned back to the other two guild leaders. "Do you gentlemen feel the same way? If you do, you're welcome to leave now, and we'll let the city garrison try to return you to obedience."

"You'd not do that," Khesphmois exclaimed. "Calling out the soldiers would—"

"—Set all Alexandria aflame," Dekanos finished for him. "I know. But what good are soldiers if they cannot be used? The Emperor wants this pharos built. If I have to choose between offending the Alexandrian guilds and offending the *Basileus* of the Romans, I know what my choice will be."

If he was bluffing, he was a dab hand at hiding it. Argyros would not have cared to find out, and he had far more experience with officials' ploys than either Khesphmois or Hergeus. The two guildsmen exchanged appalled glances. They had been confident Dekanos would not try to coerce them back to work. If they were wrong . . .

"I think we might talk further," Hergeus said quickly, "especially since your illustriousness has shown himself willing to move on the matter of wages."

"Not any too willing." Having gained an advantage, Dekanos looked ready to hold onto it.

Khesphmois saw that clearly. "If it pleases the illustrious sir," he suggested, "we would agree to leaving the matter of how large our raise should be in the hands of the magistrianos here. He represents the Emperor, who as you say is eager to have the lighthouse restored. If it weren't for him, we wouldn't be talking at all. I expect he'd be fairer than any local man I can think of."

Argyros wondered whether Khesphmois would have said that had he known how badly the magistrianos had wanted to go to bed with his wife. Still, the master carpenter had a point. "I will make this settle-

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ment," Argyros said, "if all of you swear by Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, by the Virgin, and by your great Alexandrian saints Athanasios, Cyril, and Pyrrhos to abide by the terms I set down." He was pleased with himself for thinking to add the Alexandrian saints to the oath; monophysites revered them along with the orthodox.

"I will swear that oath, for myself and on behalf of my guild," Khesphmois said at once, and did so. When he was through, Hergeus echoed him.

Their eyes swung to Dekanos. He let them stew for a while, then said gruffly, "Oh, very well. Time to have this cursed *anakhoresis* settled." He swore the oath.

"Thank you, gentlemen, for your trust in me. I hope I can deserve it," Argyros said. He was stalling; events had piled up faster than he was quite ready for. After some thought, he went on, "As for the matter of pay, justice, I am sure, lies between the demands of the two sides. Therefore let pay for work on the pharos henceforth be half again the usual rate, for all guilds."

"Let it be so," Dekanos said promptly. The nods from Hergeus and Khesphmois were reluctant; the master carpenter's expression showed him unhappy with the choice he'd made.

Argyros raised a hand. "I am not finished. As we have all agreed, work on the pharos is uncommonly dangerous. Therefore, if a guildsman should die of an accident while doing that work, let the city government of Alexandria rather than his guild pay for his funeral."

This time Khesphmois and Hergeus quickly agreed, while Mouamet Dekanos sent the magistrianos a sour stare. Argyros bore up under it. Unlike Dekanos, he had looked down from the top of the pharos; he could imagine with gut-wrenching clarity what the results of even the smallest slip would be.

And if a worker did slip, he would bring disaster not just upon himself but also on his family. Argyros thought of the troubles Helen would have had bringing up Sergios as a widow had he rather than his wife and son perished in the smallpox epidemic. He said, "Finally, if a married worker should die of an accident while working on the pharos, let the city government of Alexandria settle on his widow and children (if any) a sum equal to, ah, six months' pay, for he will have died in service to the city and it is unjust to leave his family destitute on account of that service."

"No!" Dekanos said. "You go too far, much too far."

"Remember the oath you swore!" Khesphmois shouted at him, while Hergeus added, "Will you turn a profit on dead men's blood?"

Argyros sat silent, waiting Dekanos out. Finally the official said, "As I have sworn an oath, I must abide by it. But, sir, I shall also send a

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letter to the Master of Offices setting forth in detail the manner in which you have overstepped your authority. In detail."

"My authority, illustrious sir, is to get work started on the pharos once more. When you write to George Lakhanodrakon, do please remember to mention that I have done so." The magistrianos turned to Khesphmois and Hergeus. "Your guilds will end the *anakhoresis* on the terms I have set forth?"

"Yes," they said together. Khesphmois muttered something in Coptic to Hergeus. Then, catching Argyros's eye, he translated: "I said I'd told him you could be trusted." The magistrianos dipped his head. Pleased by the compliment, he even forgot for a moment what he'd wanted to do with Zois.

Two weeks later, not another stone had gone into place on the pharos. Argyros stood in front of a half-built church. Miysis, mallet and chisel in hand, stared down at him from the top of a large limestone block. "I told you no before, and I still mean no," the stonecutter said.

"But why?" Argyros said, craning his neck. "The carpenters and cement-spreaders have agreed to end the *anakhoresis*, and agreed gladly. Half again regular pay and compensation to widows and orphans is nothing to sneeze at."

Miysis spat, though not, the magistrianos had to admit, in his direction. "The carpenters and cement-spreaders are fools, if you ask me. What good does pay and a half do a dead man, or even blood money for his family? Me, I'm plenty happy to work a safer job for less money, and my lads think the same. We stay withdrawn."

As if to show that was his last word on the subject, he started chiseling away at the limestone block again. Chips flew. One landed in Argyros's hair. He stepped back, thinking dark thoughts. When he walked off, Miysis lifted the mallet in an ironic farewell salute.

The magistrianos, head down, walked north between the Museion's three exedra and the Sema of Alexander the Great without glancing at either the lecture-halls to the left or the marble tomb to the right. Only when he almost bumped into one of the men lined up to see Alexander's remains in their coffin of glass did he take a couple of grudging steps to one side.

"Miserable muttonhead," he mumbled, "happy to work his cursed safer job while the pharos goes to perdition." He stopped dead in his tracks, smacked fist into palm. "Happy, is he? Let's just see how happy he'll be!"

Then, instead of glumly walking, Argyros was trotting, sometimes running, toward the Augustal prefect's palace. He arrived panting and drenched in sweat but triumphant. Mouamet Dekanos raised an eyebrow

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when the magistrianos burst past lesser functionaries into his office. "What's all this in aid of?" he asked.

"I know how to end the *anakhoresis*. At last, I know."

"This I will believe when I see it, and not before I see it," Dekanos said. "You came close, I grant you that, but how do you propose to move the stonecutters to the pharos if they are content with lesser pay for other work?"

Argyros grinned a carnivore grin. "How content will they be with no pay for no work?"

"I don't follow," Dekanos said.

"Suppose an edict were to go out in the Augustal prefect's name, suspending all construction in stone in Alexandria for, say, the next three months? Don't you think the stonecutters would start to get a trifle hungry by then? Hungry enough, even, to think about going back to work on the pharos?"

Dekanos's eyes went wide. "They might. They just might. And since they weren't party to the agreements with the other guilds, we wouldn't even have to pay them extra."

The magistrianos had thought about that, too, in the third of an hour it took him to get to the prefect's palace. He would enjoy revenge for Miysis' insolence. Still, he said, "No, I think not. The contrast between those who do work on the pharos and have extra silver to jingle in their pouches and those who do not and have none—"

"A distinct point," Dekanos said. "Very well, let it be as you say. Some wealthy men will scream when their houses stand a while half-built—"

"The Emperor of the Romans is screaming now, because his pharos has stood too long half-built."

"A distinct point," Dekanos repeated. He shouted for scribes.

Not even a journeyman carpenter was working at Khesphmois's shop when Argyros pushed his way through the curtain of beads. Only a servant lounged in the open courtyard. As far as the magistrianos could see, the fellow's main job was to make sure no one came in and made off with the partly made or partly repaired furniture there.

The servant scrambled to his feet when Argyros entered. He bowed, said something in Coptic. The magistrianos spread his hands. "What you want?" the servant asked in broken Greek.

"Is your master at home?" Argyros asked, speaking slowly and clearly—and also loudly. "I wish to pay my respects to him."

"Him not here," the servant said after Argyros had repeated himself a couple of times. "Him, everyone at—how you say?—pharos. Work there all time. You want, you come sabbath day after prayers. Maybe here then."

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"I won't be here then," Argyros said. "My ship sails for Constantinople day after tomorrow."

He saw the servant had not understood him and, sighing, began casting about in his mind for simpler words. He was just starting over when he heard a familiar voice from the living quarters behind the shop: "Is that you, Basil Argyros of Constantinople?"

"Yes, Zois, it is."

She came out a moment later. "It's good to see you again. Would you care for some wine and fruit?" Nodding, the magistrianos stepped toward her. The servant started to come, too. Zois stopped him with a couple of sentences of crackling Coptic. To Argyros, she explained, "I told Nekhebu that Khesphmois wants him out here keeping an eye on the furniture, not inside keeping an eye on me. I can take care of myself; the furniture can't."

"I'm sure you can, my lady." Argyros let her lead him into the chamber where they had talked before.

This time, she brought out the wine and dates herself. "Lukra had her brat last week, and she's still down with a touch of fever," she said. "I expect she will get over it." Her voice was enigmatic; Argyros could not tell whether she wanted the serving-girl to recover.

He said, "I came to thank Khesphmois for all he did to help end the *anakhoresis*. Since I'm lucky enough to see you, let me thank you also, for helping to turn him in that direction. I'm grateful."

She sipped her wine, nibbled daintily on a candied date, the pink tip of her tongue flicking out for a moment as it toyed with the fruit. "Did I hear you say you were leaving Alexandria day after tomorrow?"

"Yes. It's time for me to go. The pharos is a-building again, and so I have no need to stay any longer."

"Ah," she said, which might have meant anything or nothing. After a pause that stretched, she went on, "In that case, you can thank me properly."

"Properly?" Somehow, Argyros thought, Zois's eyes suddenly seemed twice as large as they had just before. She leaned back in her chair. He admired the fine curve of her neck. Then he was kneeling beside that chair, bending to kiss the smooth, warm flesh of her throat. Even if he was wrong, said the calculating part of him that never quite slept, Khesphmois had already returned to the pharos. . . .

But he was not wrong. Zois's breath sighed out; her hands clasped the back of his head. "The bedroom?" Argyros whispered some time later.

"No. Lukra's chamber is next to it, and she might overhear." For all her sighs, Zois still seemed very much in control of herself. "We will have to manage here."

The room had neither couch nor, of course, bed, but not all postures

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require them. Manage they did, with Zois on her knees and using her chair to support the upper part of her body. She was almost as exciting as Argyros had imagined; in this imperfect world, he thought before all thought fled, one could hardly hope for more.

She gasped with him at the end, but he was still coming back to himself when she turned to look over her shoulder at him and say, "Pull up your breeches." As he did so, she swiftly repaired her own dishevelment. Then she waved him back to his own chair, remarking, "Khesphmois must not know what we've done. *I* do, which is what matters."

"So you were only using me to pay back Khesphmois?" he asked, more than a trifle nettled. Here he had thought he was desired for his sake, but instead found himself merely an instrument to Zois. This, he realized uncomfortably, had to be how a seduced woman felt.

Zois's reply reinforced his discomfort: "We all use one another, do we not?" She softened that a moment later, adding with a smile, "I will say I enjoyed this use more than some—more than most, even."

Something, that, but not enough. How many was most? Argyros did not want to know. He got to his feet. "I'd best head back to my lodging," he said. "I still have some packing to do."

"For a ship that sails in two days?" Zois's smile was knowing. "Go, then, if you think you must. As I said, though, I did enjoy it. And I *will* give Khesphmois your thanks—I'd not be so rude as to forget that."

"I'm so glad," Argyros muttered. Zois giggled at his ostentatiously held aplomb, which only made him cling to it more tightly. The bow he gave her was as punctilious as if he'd offered it to the Master of Offices' wife. She giggled again. He left, hastily.

On the way back to his room—he really had no better place to go—he reflected on the changes he had made since coming to Alexandria. From celibate to fornicator to adulterer, all in the space of a few weeks, he thought, filled with self-reproach. Then he remembered that he would eagerly have become an adulterer before, had he thought Zois willing. Now he knew just how willing she was, and found something other than delight in the knowledge.

Yet he also knew how sweet her body was, and the whore's as well. Having fallen from celibacy, he doubted he would ever be able to return to it. As well, then, that he had not let grief drive him into a monastery. His instinct there had been right: he was much too involved with the things of this world to renounce it for the next until he drew his last breath. Best to acknowledge that fully, and live with the consequences as best he could.

Thinking that, he let himself take some pride in his success here. One day before too many more years had passed, Alexandria's beacon would shine again, saving countless sailors as time went by. Had he not come

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to help set things right, that might have been long delayed, or accomplished only through bloodshed. And preventing such strife might earn him credit in heaven, to set in the balance against the weight of his sins.

He could hope, anyway.

"Argyros! Wait!"

The magistrianos set his sack on the planking of the dock, turned to find out who was shouting at him. He was surprised to see Mouamet Dekanos hurrying up the quay toward him. "I thought you'd be just as glad to have me go far away," he said as the Alexandrian bureaucrat came near.

Dekanos smiled thinly. "I understand what you mean. Still, the pharos *is* going up, and I did have *something* to do with that. Besides which, I stay here, while you *are* going far away. My contribution will be remembered." He checked to make sure no one was listening, lowered his voice. "I will make sure it is remembered."

"I daresay you will," Argyros chuckled. He understood Dekanos's logic perfectly well. What he did not understand was why the official was carrying a sack larger and fuller than his own. He pointed to it. "What have you there?"

"I was most impressed with your ability to bring together two sides, neither of which was truly interested in finding a solution to their dispute until you intervened," Dekanos said obliquely.

Argyros gave a polite bow. "You're very kind, illustrious sir. Still—"

"You don't think I answered you," Dekanos finished for him.

"No."

"Ah, but I did, for, you see, I've brought you another longstanding dispute which neither side seems interested in solving. What I have here, illustrious sir, is *Pcheris vs. Sarapion*—all of it." With a sigh of relief, he set his burden down. It *was* heavier than Argyros's sack; through his sandals, the magistrianos felt the dock timbers briefly quiver at its weight.

"You're sure that's all?" he asked, intending irony.

The attempt failed. "I do think so," Dekanos answered seriously. "If not, the documents you have should refer back to any that happen to be missing."

"Oh, very well," Argyros said, laughing, "I'll take it on. As you say, after the pharos, something this small should be easy. The winds won't favor my ship as much on the way back to Constantinople; God willing, I should be to the bottom of your case by the time I'm there. It will make the voyage less boring."

"Thank you." Dekanos wrung the magistrianos's hand. "Thank you." The Alexandrian official bowed several times before taking his leave.

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Argyros shrugged quizzically as he watched him go. In his days in the imperial army, he'd sometimes received less effusive thanks for saving a man's life. He shrugged again as he carried the two sacks onto the ship. He opened the one full of legal documents.

Long before the pharos of Alexandria slipped below the southern horizon, he suspected Mouamet Dekanos had done him no favor. Long before he reached Constantinople again, he was sure of it. O

NEXT ISSUE

We start another year of top-of-the-line, State of the Art *IAsfm* stories next month, with an exciting January issue full of top talent, both established Names and rising new stars. Hugo-and-Nebula winner **Gregory Benford** contributes our January cover story, taking us to the remote reaches of Jupiter space, to the hostile and dangerous surface of the frozen moon Ganymede—and simultaneously to near-future California—for an exciting, fast-moving (and slyly deceptive) tale of high-tech future combat, in "Warstory"; this is Benford at his best—don't miss it. Then bestselling author **Mike Resnick** makes his *IAsfm* debut, taking us to an orbiting space colony that has been remade in the likeness of ancient Kenya, for an intricate and engrossing tale of cultural conflict, in "Bwana"; another story set in this milieu, "Kirinyaga," was a Hugo- and Nebula-award Finalist this year, and we have several more Kirinyaga stories in inventory; this is the start of a series you won't want to miss.

ALSO IN JANUARY: new writer **Greg Egan** makes his *IAsfm* debut with a hard-edged and sizzlingly suspenseful story of a high-tech future cop trying to prevent an extremely bizarre crime, in "The Caress"; **Molly Gloss** returns after too long an absense with a thoughtful and thought-provoking study of one man's personal commitment to his ideals in the face of overwhelming odds, in "Personal Silence"; veteran author **Tom Purdom** makes his *IAsfm* debut with a sly and witty look at just what you really need in order to have "A Proper Place To Live"; hot new writer **Kathe Koja** returns with a bittersweet look at a very strange sort of love affair, in "True Colors"; and World-Fantasy-Award winner **John M. Ford** returns to slyly unravel all the most perplexing riddles of the universe, in "Cosmology: A User's Manual." Plus our usual array of columns, an index of last year's stories and features, and a ballot for you to use in voting in our Fourth Annual Reader's Award poll. Look for our jam-packed January issue on sale on your newsstands on December 12, 1989.

COMING SOON: big new stories by **Pat Cadigan, Walter Jon Williams, Charles Sheffield, Pat Murphy, Isaac Asimov,** and many others.

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WHEN I SEE RIGEL'S LIGHT SLEETING THROUGH THE SIDE OF HEINLEIN STATION

When I see Rigel's light sleeting through the side of Heinlein Station
Gleaming red from floating dust and bright on broken metal edges
Lighting the corridors a color the station's crew never saw
Through a hole where bodies drifted in final decompression
When I remember the centuries that this vessel drove
through the void
Toward an unknown, an alien and hostile destination
When I feel the emptiness that fills it
That pulls my suit into a puffed and stiffened bubble
So that I am as awkward and strange in these chambers
as Rigel's light
I wonder how the legends of Earth must lie, must hide the truth
I wonder why, what horrors our ancestors hid from us
With their tales of blue skies and green hills
And lies those tales must surely be
I know this when I see how they struggled to come here
If Earth were fair and beautiful, as they told us
Then how could they have left?

—Lawrence Watt-Evans

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ON BOOKS

by Baird Searles

Hyperion Highs

Hyperion
By Dan Simmons
Doubleday, $18.95 (hardcover), $6.95 (paper)

Dan Simmons's *Hyperion* is some sort of extraordinary book. I won't say great because that's a judgment which comes with time but, speaking of time, it's been quite a while since I've come across a novel that is at once so involving, so conceptually complex, and written with such style.

After an introduction like that, of course, it's up to the reviewer to justify such a rush to judgment. There's the rub. Not for the first time do I note that the more good SF gets increasingly complicated in its ideas and its backgrounds, the more difficult it is to capsulize plot and milieu with any coherence. *Hyperion* consists of an incredibly involved plot set against an even more involved background, a future ruled by and acted upon by factors as myriad and interwoven as those of the present (but a lot more interesting). So stand warned; the following won't make much sense until you read the book (and you'd better read the book after I've gone to all this trouble to get you interested).

There is the Hegemony of one hundred and sixty worlds, not to mention the worlds outside the Hegemony (mostly waiting for admittance) and the Ouster swarms, an ongoing threat of barbarian outcasts who live in constructed zero-gravity globe cities beyond the Worldweb. There is the Worldweb itself which links the Hegemony worlds by means of farcasters, matter transmitters so perfected that you can lunch on any of the one hundred and sixty worlds, *or* (if rich enough) have a mansion in which each of the rooms looks out on the landscape of a different planet (and walk downstairs to a tower view—think about it), *or* (as happens in the story) have a chase sequence which extends over any number of worlds.

There's the Worldweb All Thing, the real time network which governs the Hegemony and has evolved a form of autonomy and self-consciousness of its own. And don't forget the Technocore, with a population of six thousand Artificial Intelligences which more or less seceded from human affairs some centuries back but which still monitors planetary dataspheres and advises the All Thing.

That's just a hint of the *general*

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background. Then there's the specific background of the world Hyperion, which is something of a maverick. It's not in the Worldweb for several reasons, mostly to do with the strange anomalies found on it. These are artifactual—the Time Tombs, surrounded by anti-entropic fields—and living—the Shrike, a strange being which appears and disappears, killing as it does, and around which a powerful religious cult has grown throughout the Hegemony. Hyperion is also the site of a failed artistic colony, founded by the eccentric King Billy—a devotee of Keats. Two major cities on Hyperion are called Keats and Endymion. (Keats and his works are a recurring theme throughout the novel.)

As the novel begins, Hyperion is in a bad way. An Ouster migration cluster is about to invade the planet; the Time Tombs are showing signs of opening; and the Shrike has increased its lethal activities to a degree that strikes total panic in Hyperion's population. The planet has no farcaster for evacuation; if one is installed, the Shrike or the invading Ousters could use it to penetrate the Hegemony.

There you have general and specific backgrounds. But there's also the plot(s). This could be plural since the bulk of the novel is devoted to six stories, told by six of the seven varied individuals "chosen" (read forced, by the Hegemony or circumstance) to go on the Shrike Pilgrimage, a devotion usually only undertaken by members of the Church of the Shrike (since pilgrims usually don't come back).

Since there is no farcaster on Hyperion, there's time for all but one of the "pilgrims" (each, in his/her way, an important citizen of the Hegemony) to tell his/her story—they get to Hyperion on one of the great interstellar treeships of the Templars. And all of the stories are really almost self-contained novellas; if I were to give each the attention it deserves, we'd be here until the cows come home. It must, though, be noted that they vary to an amazing degree. One, told by one of the last remaining Catholic clergy, is religious in its overtones. Another is as military and battle-oriented as *Starship Troopers*. Yet another is a full-fledged murder mystery—an AI (who is a physical and intellectual replicate of Keats) has been murdered and hires a private detective to find out who murdered it (if you think I'm going to explain that any further, think again). And another (from a poet) has some telling things to say about future and present writing and publishing.

But every story advances our knowledge of this abstruse future, and adds to what we know about Hyperion and its mysteries. Does it all come to a satisfying, neatly tied-up conclusion? I have to say no—there are (at least on first reading) a lot of loose ends, and the finale is one of those which might cause some people to throw the book across the room. This occurred to me to do, but very quickly

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I quashed the thought—the ending is fair, if not satisfying, and what has gone before is so very full and rich that where it stops quite literally doesn't matter.

This review has gone on so long (not apologizing—how grand to find a novel worth waxing lengthy over), I may as well indulge myself with a further note. It's fascinating to watch concepts emerge and become lingua franca in SF. The usual procedure is for someone to have an original idea and write a story around it (the time machine, FTL/interstellar travel, matter transmission, etc.), usually with a great deal of scientific or pseudo-scientific rationale. Then the idea will appear in other stories, again with a lot of justifying wordage. (You have no idea how much verbiage was spent in the SF of the 1940s explaining various means of travelling interstellar distances.) Then it finally becomes common coin, and no explanation is necessary. (And finally trickles down to comic books, movies, and general public awareness.) This process is happening with the planetary infonet concept right now—and it's gone through the various stages very speedily. *Hyperion,* for instance, takes the idea completely for granted and lord help anyone who hasn't heard of the idea.

Blest Be Sidhe

Isles of the Blest
By Morgan Llywelyn
Ace, $3.95 (paper)

In *Isles of the Blest,* Morgan Llywelyn has reworked the tale of Connla of the Fiery Hair—but only a little. It has been called "the earliest fairy tale of modern Europe," and is an archaic version of the more familiar story of Ossian and the Land of Youth. The Connla version predates Christianity, so St. Patrick is not present.

Connla, a young Irish prince, heeds the call of a beautiful young fairy woman (after much coaxing) and goes with her to the Isles of the Blest. She has promised him that there is no killing, no sorrow, no aging, and no hunger there and Connla, sick to death of the wars of the petty Irish kings, decides that's the place for him.

After an adventurous voyage aboard an air-borne horse, they arrive at the Isles. Blathine, the fey lady, has not misrepresented them, but there are subtler aspects she hasn't mentioned. Her people, the Sidhe (pronounced, as everyone must know by now, "Shee"), eschew responsibility—which eliminates love, despite an endless amount of sexual pleasure. And *nothing* changes, not the sky or the weather or the season or the tee-perature. No matter how much happens, a consistent refrain for Connda's stay is "no time passed."

And yet time passes outside, and we see Connla's father, Conn of the Hundred Battles, grow old and mourn for his son. Connla becomes a hero to the Sidhe for defeating a dragon, (their sole menace) and asks to visit home. There is only one person left alive who remem-

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bers him, and when his identity is established, it seems he must fight Conn's heir, Cormac mac Airt, for the throne.

Llywelyn handles the ambiguity of Connla's situation and feelings very neatly, by treading a fine line between "modernization" of the legend (language and dialogue are quite sophisticated, sometimes amusingly so) and maintaining the straightforward, not-necessarily rational progression of events. Her Sidhe are not soullessly evil, or even amoral; they are irresponsibly likable and their Isles are wonderfully tempting, despite the flaws. This is not a story of black and white, or easy choices; whether this is modern or archaic, it's hard to say, but it makes for a most intriguing fantasy.

Time Place

A Tale of Time City

By Diana Wynne Jones

Bullseye/Knopf, $3.95 (paper)

Diana Wynne Jones has always been an enjoyably goofy writer. Her novels, supposedly written for "young adults" (dumb phrase), generally take some basically familiar SF or fantasy theme and weave wild and wonderful variations on it, filigreed with zany decorations which could only come from this particular author.

A Tale of Time City (first published in hardcover a couple of years back), alas, doesn't quite work as well as many of her earlier books. Time City is built outside of time but keeps an eye on all the ages of mankind as well as educating students from various periods. It also exchanges nonthreatening (to stability) knowledge with, and serves as a tourist mecca for, visitors from "fixed eras." (Meeting your descendants is a big attraction.)

But it seems Time City is literally breaking up, due to sabotage by a former inhabitant who is roaming through time itself. Sam and Jonathan, sons of Time City officials, think they know when to find the villain, and go back to 1939 Britain. They abduct a girl, sent out of London to escape the Blitz, from a country train station, but apparently Vivian is a perfectly ordinary inhabitant of 1939, and now she's stuck in Time City. Things get very complicated indeed, and the three young people have to do a lot of time traveling to various "Unstable Eras" of the future (as well as several trips back to the 1939 train station) to find the components which will save the city. The dashing in and out of public and private time portals eventually achieves all the freneticism of French farce, leaving the reader totally bemused.

However, even if the plot becomes unglued early on, Jones can never be anything but an entertaining writer, and the details of Time City (the Escher architecture of the gravityless main library, for instance) and the various peculiar eras that her heroes and heroine have to visit are diverting enough to keep you reading even when

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you're not exactly sure where you are or why you're there.

Ape

Eva

By Peter Dickinson
Delacorte, $14.95

Like Diana Wynne Jones, Peter Dickinson is a British author who keeps coming up with the unexpected, out-of-left-field twists on familiar themes. His latest novel, *Eva,* certainly fits the description.

The setting is a near future in which the human race is just holding its own against overpopulation. Every other animal species is extinct except for chimpanzees, which have been kept as much for practical purposes of experimentation as for humanitarian reasons.

The novel's main character, Eva, is the daughter of the Director of Primate Zoology in charge of research with the International Chimp (gene) Pool. Eva has grown up with chimpanzees; on a family outing with two of the chimps, there is a horrendous car accident (caused by one of the chimps) and Eva, badly injured, goes into an irreversible coma.

Thanks to an experimental process invented by one of her father's colleagues, her neuron memory is "regrown" in the body of a chimpanzee. Eva wakes to find herself physically an anthropoid. Dickinson takes this fascinating premise and follows it through absolutely realistically. The novel is essentially Eva's biography, starting with her painful attempts to learn to use her new body. It takes her through the effect her revival has on the world population (human *and* chimpanzee) to her death from old age twenty-four years later, in a world in which civilization is suffering a total breakdown and Eva and her fellow chimpanzees may be the only seeds of any future whatsoever.

Eva is not a comfortable book. I would guess, because of its subject matter and its realistic handling, it might well be a difficult read for some, particularly those who find chimpanzees unnerving to begin with. Be that as it may, it is a novel way out of the ordinary.

Red and White

Snow White and Rose Red

By Patricia C. Wrede
Tor, $15.95

Patricia Wrede's *Snow White and Rose Red* is yet another novelization of a fairy tale, one of the less grim of the Grimms'. This is the one about the two sisters who get mixed up with an enchanted bear and a mean dwarf. The sisters are named Rose Red and Snow White, which tends to confuse people because of the fame brought to a completely different Snow White through stardom in the cinema.

This Snow White is a perfectly ordinary peasant girl (though very beautiful), and she and her sister (also beautiful) live on the edge of a deep, dark wood in a nice little cottage with their mother. They give winter shelter to a talking bear (who of course is a handsome

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young man, enchanted) and encounter an unpleasant dwarf (who laid the enchantment to get the young man's jewels). All ends well, dwarf dead, young man restored and rejeweled.

Wrede has taken this rather peculiar plot, laid it in Elizabethan England, and embroidered it into a full-length modern fantasy which, except for the titular characters, would be unrecognizable to the Bros. Grimm. The mother of RR and SW (here Rosamunde and Blanche) is now a respectable widow-woman who makes her living marketing herbs and philters, and has more than a little knowledge of magic, but who lives in mortal fear of the accusation of witchcraft. The deep, dark forest is one of the borders to Faerie, and contains the palace of the Faerie Queen herself. There Blanche and Rosamunde sometimes gather slightly irregular herbs, but heed their mother's warning to stay clear of the faerie folk.

The other participants in the drama fall into several groupings. There are the two half-human sons of the Faerie Queen by Thomas the Rimer, Hugh and John respectively. Hugh stays home like a good fay, but John tends to wander in human lands. There is the Queen's lady-in-waiting, Madini, a bitch-on-wheels who has it in for all humans and therefore has it in for John in particular, and her co-conspirators, a dwarfish oakman and a rather slimy water fay.

Finally there are Queen Elizabeth's alchemist/physician, Doctor Dee, who lives in the nearby town of Mortlak, and his disreputable colleague, one Edward Kelly. These two set the plot in motion by ignorantly trying to heist some fairy magic and inadvertently capturing Prince Hugh's essence; what's left of Hugh turns into a bear. Lady Madini manages to cast the blame for this onto John, who is exiled from Faerie, as is Hugh Bear (cruel, these faerie folk).

Hugh blunders into the cottage of Blanche and Rosamunde, and has enough speech and intelligence left to endear himself to them. The bulk of the plot is the efforts of the three human women to undo the damage, and the various attempts by the others to thwart them.

It's to Wrede's credit that she manages to make rather an engaging tale out of all this, and to also retain some of the fairy-tale simplicity of character and plot while still creating some likable people and keeping the action going for the length of a novel.

Mummy Love

The Mummy, or Ramses the Damned

By Anne Rice

Ballantine, $11.95 (paper)

I am second to none in my admiration for Anne Rice's novels of the lives and loves of vampires and *castrati*, but I'll be damned if I know what she's trying to do in her latest, *The Mummy, Or Ramses the Damned*.

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The initial setup is straight from a mummy movie of the 30s; Lawrence Stanford, a rich archeologist, discovers an Egyptian burial room containing a mummy, a pharmacopoeia of poisons, and a lot of inscriptions. While working in the tomb, Lawrence is slipped some of the antique (but still lethal) poison in his coffee by his wastrel nephew Henry and dies. The tomb's artifacts, inscriptions, and mummy are shipped to the house of Lawrence's beautiful daughter, Julie, in London. Her friends and relations include: the aforementioned Henry (boo, sssss); his weakling father Randolph; Lawrence's old school friend (and ex-lover—okay, *that* wouldn't be in a 30s movie) Elliott, now badly crippled with age; and *his* son Alex to whom Julie is rather indifferently engaged.

Julie sets up the mummy in the drawing room; Henry comes to visit, and tries to slip some poison into *her* coffee. But before she takes a sip, a lucky distraction occurs. The mummy becomes reanimated and grabs Henry, who escapes out the door. Unwrapped, the mummy turns out to be one tall, handsome hunk who also happens to be absolutely brilliant—he learns English in an afternoon and reads everything in the library immediately. It seems that he is Ramses II, who has imbibed a Hittite potion that conveys immortality, hung around Egypt until Cleopatra's day, been thrown over by that Greek Queen for Marc Antony, and whiled away the time since then in suspended animation. (The famous mummy that is *supposed* to be Ramses II is some poor chump that Ramses had wrapped up in his place.)

In the meantime, Henry has returned with the police. Julie introduces the mummy (now wearing a dressing gown) as Mr. Ramsey, a famous Egyptologist. She takes him on a tour of London (including a waltz or two at the Hotel Victoria—Ramses is a very quick learner), and, being flexible, he suffers less culture shock than culture ecstasy. In the meantime, fiancé Alex is confused, friend Elliott guesses who Ramsey is and wants the potion, and Henry gets drunk a lot (he knows that Ramsey knows that he did in Julie's dad).

Pretty soon, they all pile into a steamer and go to Egypt. Ramses wants. Julie doesn't want. There's a lot of panting and heaving and sighing. Alex continues to be confused. In the Cairo Museum, Ramses spots an anonymous mummy that he recognizes as Cleopatra, and pours a little of the potion on her. This is Not A Good Idea. The Serpent of the Nile comes back to life, but is not all there, physically and mentally (large chunks of mummy were missing). Ramses revived had an omnivorous appetite for food, drink, and knowledge; Cleo adds to that a large appetite for men and a nasty habit of breaking their necks after coitus.

Cleopatra links up with nasty Henry and breaks his neck. Elliott

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and Ramses chase Cleopatra all over Cairo. Henry gets mummified by a fake mummy racket and put up for sale as an antique. Cleopatra breaks an American car salesman's neck on the Great Pyramid. Julie gives in to Ramses. Cleopatra ensnares Alex (who is confused). Everybody goes to a performance of *Aïda*. There's a showdown at the Opera Ball. Cleopatra is run over by a train. Elliott drinks the elixir. Julie and Ramses go back to England. Cleopatra comes back to life in the Sudan. Alex continues to be confused.

Now one could understand if Rice had taken the initial mummy movie premise (which was, after all, watered down Haggard, from a period when mysticism was a legitimate area of scientific research) and done something with it—deepened it, spoofed it, whatever. But as one can see from the preceding epic silliness, it's as if she'd taken a typical horror flick script and redone it for an eight-hour miniseries with a little sex added. I don't get it. Like Alex, I'm confused.

Future in the Past

Yesterday's Pawn

By W. T. Quick
Signet, $3.95 (paper)

There's a traditional form in SF that consists of the story that starts with a trivial incident, which triggers a sequence of events which leads to some sort of cosmic climax involving, at the least, the fate of humanity. The perfect example is Heinlein's *Have Spacesuit, Will Travel*; James Schmitz's *The Witches of Karres* comes to mind as well.

W. T. Quick tries something of the same kind of conceptual crescendo in *Yesterday's Pawn*. Here the opening event takes place in a pawn shop and it's as simple as a customer wanting to pawn something. The pawn shop is on the planet of H'hogoth, and the problem is that the item is an alien artifact. Garry, the seventeen-year-old hero, has been left in charge by his father, and he accepts the item.

In no time all hell breaks loose. After his father returns, the shop is attacked and blown up, the artifact is stolen, Garry's father is badly wounded, and Garry escapes by the skin of his teeth. Not daring to go home, he falls in with Frego, a lowlife type who is Not What He Seems, and who reveals that Garry's father is Not What *He* Seems. (They are both part of the Search—a human effort to find a faster-than-light drive independent of the one which the alien H'hogoth have shared with them—to a degree.)

Soon the hospital is bombed, and Garry's father is killed. Garry and Frego, on the slimmest of clues, go searching the spaceways for the artifact (remember the artifact?—it may be an FTL drive invented by a long dead race) and the killer.

So far the novel could be one of those interstellar quests which can be fun depending on the inventiveness of the clues and cultures encountered, but then Quick ups the

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cosmic complexity factor another several notches. This involves being thrown into the past where Garry finds future mankind which has gone back *in toto* to make a new future ("This is the future of mankind. Here, now, in the past. What you think of, as your present, is the past to us.")

Then we get thrown back to the time of the Big Bang, where Garry, who is also Not What He Seems (even to himself) seems to get to start the Universe. At least I think that's what happens—I'm sorry to say the author lost me a while before that. Those readers cleverer than I might be able to go the course and figure out what happens. Quick tends to invoke Stephen Hawking's works—maybe they're a prerequisite. (Have you noticed how Hawking has suddenly become a science fiction icon? We're getting futures now with Hawking Drives, Hawking Effects, Hawking Belts, etc. Some will say that this is SF keeping up on the cutting edge of science, others that it's yet another case of jumping aboard the latest pop science bandwagon.)

Hick From Hicksnittle

Jason Cosmo
By Dan McGirt
Signet, $3.95 (paper)

Jason Cosmo, lead character in the novel of the same name by Dan McGirt, is a perfectly ordinary young turnip farmer and woodcutter in the dreary community of Hicksnittle in the even drearier Kingdom of Darnk, one of the Eleven Kingdoms (or more correctly, Seven Kingdoms and Four Other Assorted Nation Forms, since five of the eleven aren't technically monarchies).

One ordinary day, an attempt is made by a bounty hunter to capture Jason, and he is bemused to hear that a huge reward has been offered for the capture of one Jason Cosmo. Jason takes to his heels and falls in with a magician (of course) named Mercury Boltblaster (who for a change is not inept but rather dashing). In the process of fighting off other bounty hunters and assorted menaces Jason discovers that the Dark Magic Society (the bad guys) seems to think that he is some sort of reincarnation of the Mighty Hero that ages ago bested the Demon Lords and captured and hid the Superwand given to humans by a race of fluffy pink bunnies even older than the Gods.

As you can see, this is not very high fantasy—this is, in fact, rather low fantasy. McGirt is taking off in the Pratchett vein, and while he has a way to go to catch that master, he seems to be on the right track, which is more than I can say about most so-called humorous fantasy these days.

Jason encounters in his quest (which is more of a flight) such perils as a purple dragon named Golan of the Heights, the wicked Prince Halogen, Necropholis the Grave, Rae, Goddess of the Sun (who appears in a bikini sipping Diet Sola-Cola and is not strictly speaking a

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peril, but just a little ditsy). He also has to take the Standardized Heroic Aptitude Test at one point (and complains of cultural bias since some of the questions have to do with sea monsters and he was brought up inland). And there are the Gods, who have signed a Great Eternal Pan-Cosmic Holy/Unholy Non-Intervention Pact with the Demon Lords who have since cheated, so the Gods are meddling a bit, too. They include, in addition to Rae, such notables as Heraldo, God of Propaganda and Journalism, and Vanah, Goddess of Fortune and Chance.

Comedy is almost impossible to analyze (and therefore criticize), so I can but venture one person's opinion that McGirt relies a lot on inventive (if at times sophomoric) nomenclature and the humor intrinsic in anachronistic institutions and dialogue (such as modern —sort of—slang: "Go for it" and "No problem"). The weakness is that not much that *happens* is all that funny; the situations are pretty standard fantasy. But it's a first novel, and there's promise of better to come.

Cloudy Crystal

Crystal Witness

By Kathy Tyers
Bantam, $3.95 (paper)

Kathy Tyers' *Crystal Witness* is another go-round at a revolution against the repressive interstellar corporation (or should that be multistellar corporation, as in multinational?) with some nice twists. Her heroine, Ming, is a young communications officer aboard a vessel which her clan is using to smuggle goods outside the rules of the wicked Renasco. They figure they have a good chance to do this because Ming's cousin has managed to duplicate the radiation shielding for starships which enables Renasco to maintain its monopoly. (Renasco is an acronym for Renaissance Shielding Corp.)

Alas, they get caught anyhow, and Ming is put into cold sleep for twenty years and partially mind-wiped, then put out to service on the world of Mannheim, in the employ of the company rep there. This woman, Holjpip Langelleik, practically runs Mannheim, but Ming is all but told that she is to act as a spy for Renasco.

Holjpip's establishment is a medieval court in all but name, and Ming is established as her calligrapher. Her first acquaintance is Tieg, Her Grace's "tone poet," i.e., court musician. There is also Huekk, the malformed lieutenant who is a company spy; he controls Ming's implanted slave collar which can compress the spinal cord and is threatening to do so to get damning information on Her Grace or anyone in her establishment.

Tyers has set up an interesting high-tech equivalent of a royal court with all its intrigues, spies, and flunkies. Unfortunately, the intrigue mostly amounts to all the Good Guys (Ming, Tieg, and Her Grace) having the same aim but spending most of the plot in fig-

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uring out if they can trust each other. (Her Grace eventually tracks down Ming's now-aged cousin and gets the shielding secret, thereupon precipitating the Revolution.)

And at times Tyers ventures perilously close to a hybrid SF-gothic, with Ming as the innocent governess enmeshed in the schemes of the high-born household and being courted by the music teacher with the mysterious past. For instance, Tieg, thinking of Ming: "If he only dared to clasp those lovely hands, then take her in his arms and silence her with something warmer than a cyanite dart." Maybe one should have been warned by the jacket blurb, which reads: ". . . daily she lives with deadly threats from two men—the hideous mutant Zardir Huekk and the handsome, deceptive musician Tieg Innig—who both want the same thing: Information." *Information?* Not judging by the passage quoted above.

Drama Obscura

Casting Fortune

By John M. Ford
Tor, $3.95 (paper)

Quite appropriately for a story about the theater, John M. Ford's *Casting Fortune* is not what it seems at first glance. At first glance, for instance, the cover—a sinister cowled figure, with a skull belt buckle and a really nasty looking scythe, beneath a Gothic arch crowned with another skull —suggests a supernatural horror story. But no—on the spine it says "Fantasy."

And at first glance, it appears to be a novel, but after perusing the description of the story on the back, you come across the note that there are also two "bonus stories" set in the same universe. What this boils down to is that the book consists of three less-than-novel-length works. And even at second glance, you might take all these stories for new. But they are three stories set in Liavek, a created world (more correctly, created city) to which several multi-author collections have been devoted, and in which the two "bonus stories" have appeared.

None of this, of course, has a thing to do with the quality of the stories, and while publishers' mysterious packaging practices often have very good reasons behind them (at least from the publishers' point of view), authors seldom have anything to do with them.

The longest story in the book (a little over half its length), "The Illusionist," is the one to which the jacket blurb is devoted and (so far as I can determine) the one which has not been published before. It should be explained that Liavek is a city of guns and railroads as well as wizardry—one gets a nineteenth-century feel from it—and that wizards and wizardry are only a factor in the city's culture. It is not a city "ruled by wizardry," as the oft-used phrase would have it. It has a thriving theater, and the story is the tale of one production, put together by the city's leading dramatist.

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The play uses four actors, who triple (i.e., play three roles) in the twelve parts in the play. There is also a dramaturge, who in this case is a wizard and who seems to be more or less stage manager and responsible for special effects (wizardry comes in handy here), and who saves the day more than once (and not just theatrically). We see the rather unorthodox auditions, the actors' home situations, and the progress of rehearsals, and when two cases of murder arise (one present, one past, the latter multiple), there are any number of circumstances to sift through to explain them.

Ford is not the most straightforward of writers, and when you're dealing with multiple characters playing multiple roles in a play the dialogue of which is more than a few times incorporated into the story, things can get pretty opaque. But if you can sort out who is playing what and with what and with whom, it's kind of fun in a convoluted sort of way.

Old Mars

The Nemesis From Terra
By Leigh Brackett
Tor, $2.95 (paper)

A while ago I was cataloguing some old pulp magazines and found myself re-enchanted all over again by the story titles of the sorceress-author Leigh Brackett: for instance, "Sea-Kings of Mars," "Black Amazon of Venus," "Queen of the Martian Catacombs," and "Lorelei of the Red Mist" (the last co-authored with Ray Bradbury). And don't jump to conclusions; these stories were wonderfully imaginative, inventive, and exciting. These were written when much of SF was confined to the solar system; conventions held that Venus was a steamy, young wet world, and Mars was dying and decadent. Mars was Brackett's pet turf, and her various evocations of various Martian civilizations—older, wiser, and much more sinful than upstart Earth's—were unforgettable. (You couldn't really be specific about sin in the puritan pulps, but Brackett was about ten times better than any of her male peers at implying it.)

A Brackett reprint is always worth noting, and while *The Nemesis from Terra* may not be one of her jazzier titles (its original magazine title was *Shadow Over Mars*), it's just as speedy and evocative as any of the others. In it, Rick Urquhart, scum of the spaceways, is told by a Martian prophetess that he will hold Mars in his hand and, by golly, by inspiring a revolution by the native Martians and good-guy Earthmen against the Terran Exploitations Company, which is—you guessed it—exploiting Mars, he eventually does. On the way, he escapes the mines with a beautiful woman through the fossilized skeleton of an extinct sandworm, gets pinned to a wall with daggers through his hands and feet and finds a couple of lost civilizations.

All this in just over a hundred

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pages, mind you. This is one of those awkward upside-down "double novels," which nevertheless are invaluable in reprinting the shorter fiction of the old days. The other side of this one is *Battle For the Stars* by Brackett's husband, Edmond Hamilton. (He was known in the Golden Age as "World-Destroyer Hamilton." Need you know more?)

Shoptalk

Anthologies and collections dept. . . . Endangered Species is a collection of thirty-seven stories from the pen of that opaque and devious author, Gene Wolfe. A look at the contents page is titillating in itself, since Wolfe's titles are always out of the ordinary. Here they range from "Peritonitis" to "When I Was Ming the Merciless." My personal favorite is "The Last Thrilling Wonder Story," a title meaningful only to those with long enough memories to recall a certain dear departed pulp magazine. The publicity from the publishers also points out that Wolfe is the chap who invented the machine that makes Pringle's potato chips, a handy fact to know if you're in search of trivia. (Tor, $19.95) . . . And speaking of opaque, *Novelty* is a collection of four novelettes by John Crowley, who can be as mysterious as anybody (Doubleday, $18.95 hardcover, $6.95 paper) . . . There seems little chance of running out of cat fantasies, and there's another anthology to prove it. *Cat-fantastic* is the name, and the editors are Andre Norton and Martin H. Greenberg (DAW, $3.95, paper).

Reprints . . . there's a new edition of Edgar Rice Burroughs' *A Princess of Mars,* that classic original which is the great-granddaddy of almost everything you're reading today in the way of SF. This one has a rather wishy-washy cover—not my idea of Dejah Thoris, chaps (the poor girl looks like the before in a before and after hallucinogenic shampoo ad). Stick with the gloriously perfect and perfectly glorious covers which Michael Whelan did for the Mars series a while back, if you can find them (Carroll & Graf, $2.95, paper—the new edition).

Sequels . . . The Mace of Souls is a sequel to Bruce Fergusson's *The Shadow of His Wings,* which was a fantasy with more than a hint of original style. Sequel, that is, in the sense of being laid in the same Six Kingdoms (William Morrow, $17.95) . . . Mercedes Lackey has begun a prequel series to her trilogy about the Heralds of Valdemar, those magical lawkeepers who have supernaturally intelligent horses as companions. The overall title for the new set is "The Last Herald Mage," taking the action back to the origin of the horse-and-herald teams. Book One is *Magic's Pawn* (DAW, $3.95, paper).

Small presses dept. . . . The ever-adventurous-but-tasteful Owlswick Press has given us over the years three lovely little books devoted to the short works of Lord

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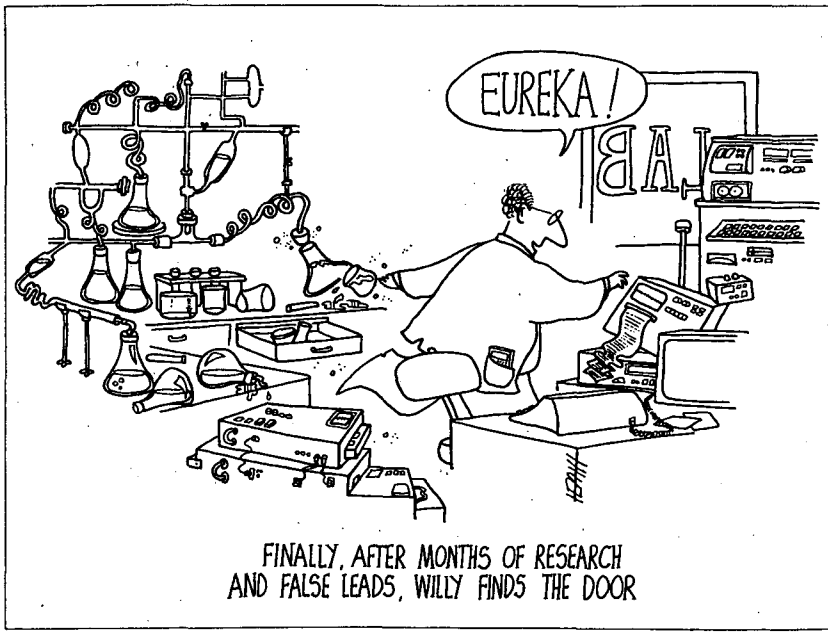
Dunsany, without whom modern fantasy would not be. Now, to round off the set, a comprehensive book *on* his writings by Darrell Schweitzer, to whom congratulations are due for the doing and the doing well. Like the others, it has illustrations by Tim Kirk (a particularly felicitous color painting is on the jacket) and a delightful introduction/reminiscence by L. Sprague de Camp (Owlswick Press, $25.00)..

Recent publications from those associated with this magazine include: *Isaac Asimov's Magical Worlds of Fantasy #11: Curses* edited by Isaac Asimov, Martin H. Greenberg, and Charles G. Waugh (Signet, $4.50, paper).

Books to be considered for review in this column should be submitted to Baird Searles, Suite 133, 380 Bleecker St., New York, N.Y. 10014.●



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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

Note that Washington, DC, dropped out of WorldCon bidding for 1992, leaving Orlando unopposed. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at Box 3343, Fairfax VA 22038. Early evening's usually a good time to call cons (most are home phones; identify yourself and your reason for calling right off). When writing cons, enclose an SASE (and again, make it plain just what it is you're asking them about). Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge.

NOVEMBER, 1989

17-19—**PhilCon.** For info, write: **Box 8303, Philadelphia PA 19101**. Or call **(215) 342-1672** (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). Con will be held in: Philadelphia PA (if city omitted, same as in address), at the Adams Mark Hotel. Guests will include: P. J. Farmer, Poul Anderson, D. Maitz, L. McM. Bujold.

17-19—**SoonerCon.** Central Plaza, Oklahoma City OK. W. Williams, B. Foster, D. Brin, B. Thomsen.

24-26—**LosCon.** Hilton, Pasadena CA. S. & J. Robinson, John & Bjo Trimble. The LA area's main con.

24-26—**DarkoverCon. (202) 737-4609.** Holiday Inn, (Baltimore) MD. Focus on M. Z. Bradley.

24-26—**Fantasy Fair. (214) 349-3367.** Marriott Park Central, Dallas TX. Packaged media/comics con.

24-26—**SiliCon, Box 8029, San Jose CA 95155.** C. de Lint, D. Cherry, Nancy L. Cobb. Red Lion Inn.

30-Dec. 3—**Polish Nat'l. Con, Gdanski Klub Fantastyki, Chylonska 191, 81-007 Gdynia, Poland. Telephone 236-740.** Brian Aldiss, Kir Bulytschov, Michelangelo Miana, Theodore Rotrekl, C. N. Brown.

DECEMBER, 1989

1-3—**ConJunction, Box 41, W. Brunswick, Vic. 3055, Australia.** St. Kilda, Australia. Relax-a-con.

1-3—**TropiCon, Box 70143, Ft. Lauderdale FL 33307.** Lynn Abbey, C. J. Cherryh, Leslie Turek.

8-10—**SMOFCon, Box 186, Stn. M, Toronto ON M6S 4T3. (416) 232-0294.** Con runners talk shop.

29-31—**EveCon, Box 128, Aberdeen MD 21002. (301) 292-5231.** Heavy on gaming, but still fannish.

JANUARY, 1990

12-14—**ChattaCon, Box 23908, Chattanooga TN 37422. (404) 591-9322.** Kube-McDowell, Cherry.

12-15—**SerCon, 1647 Willow Pass Rd. #161, Concord CA 94520. (415) 458-9304.** For serious SF fans.

AUGUST, 1990

23-27—**ConFiction, % Box 1252, BGS, New York NY 10274.** Hague, Holland. WorldCon. $70 in 1989.

30-Sep. 3—***ConDiego, Box 15771, San Diego CA 92115.*** *North American SF Con. $65 to end of 1989.*

AUGUST, 1991

29-Sep. 2—**ChiCon V, Box A3120, Chicago IL 60690.** WorldCon. H. Clement, R. Powers. $75 in '89.

AUGUST, 1992

28-Sep. 1—**MagiCon, Box 621992, Orlando FL 32862. (407) 275-0027.** The 1992 World SF Con. $40. As of this writing, bidding unopposed. The rate shown is only guaranteed to site-selection voters.

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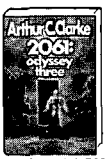

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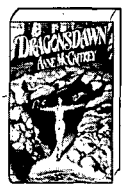

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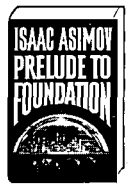

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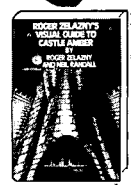

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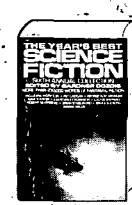

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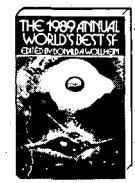

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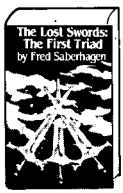

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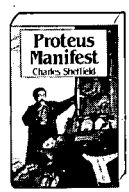

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